

Read What You Eat!

With the exception of fresh produce, nearly every food item you buy at the grocery store carries a food label. This label is an incredibly useful tool for those who are serious about their health—just walk the grocery aisles and you are likely to see multiple people staring at the sides of boxes, carefully reading the food labels. Just what do those labels say that is so interesting? If you know how to interpret the numbers you’re looking at, you can use food labels to make healthy eating a very simple process.

About Food Labels

In 1994, the U.S. government began requiring that most food items carry a nutrition facts label. All the particulars of the label were not specified, and it has changed slightly in appearance since that time, but today the standard, black-and-white label looks virtually the same on all food packages. The intention of the label was to keep food manufacturers honest about just what nutrients their products contain. With a comprehensive label, a customer can quickly check the levels of all nutrients—sodium, fat, fiber, vitamins, and others— without relying on the advertiser’s assurances that the food is “healthy” or “low fat.” This accountability gives the customer the power to control exactly how much of each nutrient they get while eating.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 Bar (85g)	
Servings Per Container 4	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 170	Calories from Fat 50
% Daily Value *	
Total Fat 6g	9%
Saturated Fat 4g	19%
Trans Fat 0g	
Polyunsaturated Fat 0.5g	
Monounsaturated Fat 1g	
Cholesterol 13mg	4%
Sodium 83mg	3%
Total Carbohydrate 33g	11%
Dietary Fiber 4g	16%

Daily Values

Before examining the main part of the nutrition facts label, it is helpful to understand the daily value system. Most food labels feature a brief summary of the daily value system, located at the very bottom of the label. The summary gives two categories: a 2,000 calorie per day diet and a 2,500 calorie diet. Under each diet is a recommended daily intake level for the most critical nutrients, like fat and fiber. This is a convenient tool, but it is important to remember that specific intake recommendations vary based

on many criteria. In order to include as many people as possible, labels focus on a 2,000 and 2,500 calorie diet. In other words, you may need to lower your fat intake if your diet is fewer than 2,000 calories per day.

LEARN MORE

Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.

FDA Nutrition Facts

www.fda.gov/Food/

USDA Food Tracker

www.supertracker.usda.gov

HOW TO READ FOOD LABELS

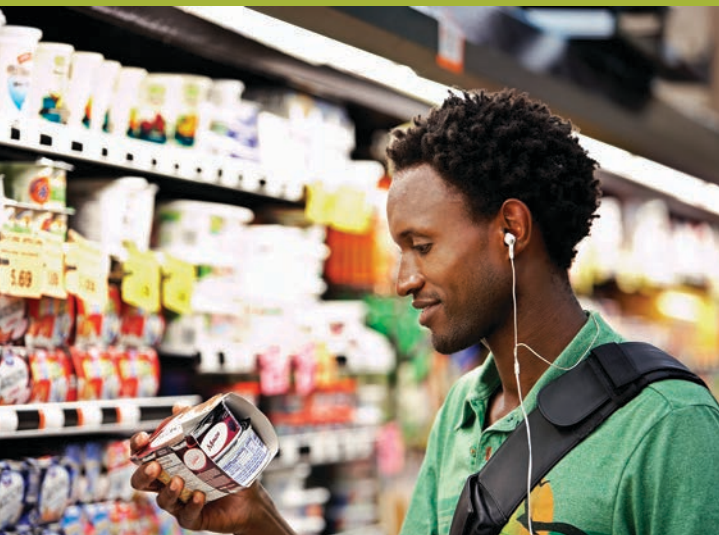


You can use food labels to make healthy eating a simple process.



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Parts of the Label

Starting from the top of the label, there are four main sections. Skipping any one section will give you an incomplete picture of the food’s total nutritional content.

Serving Size

Identifying the serving size is the first step. This is the amount of food that actually contains the nutritional amounts detailed in the rest of the label. Be careful—with many less healthy foods, we are accustomed to eating far more than a single serving at one meal. For example, a large muffin may be identified as two or even three servings. If you eat the entire muffin, you must double or triple the calories and nutrients on the label.

Caloric Content

Most people seeking to lose or stabilize weight focus on caloric intake. By simply adding together the calories of all foods that you eat throughout the day, you can get a good idea of how your weight will change accordingly.

Don’t be too quick to trust a package that says “healthy choice” or “fat free.” Advertisers know that the average shopper doesn’t take the time to read any further than that short phrase.

The other component of this section is the “calories from fat” designation. It’s a good idea to look for foods with a low calories/calories from fat ratio. For example, a serving of 200 calories with 150 calories from fat is a poor choice, while 200 calories and just 30 calories from fat is much healthier.

Nutrients to Limit

It’s tempting to call them “bad nutrients,” but the truth is that your body must have fat, sodium, and even cholesterol to function. Your job is to limit your intake of those nutrients, since the average diet overemphasizes them. Fat, cholesterol, and sodium are located toward the top of the label, and each nutrient has an actual content (in grams or milligrams) and the percentage of the recommended daily intake (usually for a 2,000 calorie per day diet). If a label shows sodium content as 35%, that means that a single serving contains just over one-third of the sodium you should have in a single day. If you are in a hurry at the store, it is best to scan this part of the label for low percentages.

Nutrients to Look For

Fiber and vitamins are deficient in most people’s diets, so they are also included on the nutrition facts label. Look for high percentages of fiber, vitamins A and C, calcium, and iron.

Using the Label

There are several ways that the nutrition facts label can help you eat right:

See Past the Hype

Don’t be too quick to trust a package that says “healthy choice” or “fat free.” Advertisers know that the average shopper doesn’t take the time to read any further than that short phrase, which only tells a small part of the story. A common tactic is to lower fat content but raise



sodium content to enhance flavor. Look at the food label to see the complete nutritional picture. If the caloric and nutritional content is balanced, it truly is a healthy food. If not, you’ve just saved yourself from falling for advertising hype.

Compare Similar Choices

Often, different brands of the same basic product look very similar. When you compare the food labels, though, you will probably find that one is healthier than the other. Making several small choices like this in the course of a shopping trip can add up to a big difference in your diet!

Tracking Nutrition

Identifying your daily intake of calories, fat, fiber and other nutrients is as simple as copying down the information from the labels of everything you eat during the day. Many online programs and smartphone apps are available for free, or at a low cost, to help you track nutritional information. Many of these programs have a database that can give you the nutritional facts of what you are eating.

At the end of the day, you can review how much of each nutrient you consumed and what changes you should make in the future. In time, you will get better at estimating those total amounts and a glance at a label will be enough to tell you whether you should enjoy that product or make a better choice.

Beat Sneaky Trans Fats

Trans fats raise “bad” cholesterol (LDL), lower “good” cholesterol (HDL), and slow down your metabolism. Look for foods with zero trans fats, but be aware that if a product contains less than 1 gram of trans fat per serving, it can be listed as containing zero trans fats. These trace amounts can add up quickly if you’re eating multiple servings throughout the day. Avoid foods that contain partially or fully hydrogenated oils, which contain large quantities of trans fats and other altered fat substances. Hydrogenated oils, often found in commercial baked goods, are designed to resist bacteria so that products can sit on grocery store shelves for extended periods of time.

Labels for Life

Developing the simple habit of reviewing food labels will help you continue healthy eating habits for life. Get to know your favorite foods better and consider replacing unhealthy options with more nutritious choices. Take control of your body by knowing exactly what you are putting into it!

