How To Read A Nutrition Label

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Understanding how to identify what is contained in the packaged foods we eat is very important. Even if you are looking at a familiar package or "usual buy" it's good to check the label to see if any ingredients have changed to your dissatisfaction. It only takes a moment to stop and read the label before adding it to your cart. There's lots of stuff that can be learned from a label, from possible allergens, storage instructions, "best used by" or expirations dates, as well as ingredients you may want to avoid, taste preference or just curiosity, let's learn how to look at a label and truly understand what it means.

Benefits to Consider

Improve your eating habits
Find foods higher in vitamins, fiber and protein
Cut back on fats, sugars, and cholesterol
Properly avoid allergens and sensitivities
Know what's exactly in the food product
Find products that are organic, non-GMO verified
Compare similar products for quality of ingredients
Learn about standard serving sizes so you don't over eat
Track calories and control your portions

How to Read the Nutrition Label

Start with the serving size, this well help you to gauge the calories as well as the total nutrients that are in the package. Some packages are deceiving. For instance a small box which may look like a single serving may actually be one and half or even two servings.

Next look at the calories. Calories are the amount of energy you get from a serving of food. Remember that the number of servings you consume determines the number of calories you actually eat. Calories are desirable energy, but if you consume more than you expend, they will get stored, often as fat. This section is important if you are trying to gain or lose weight or just manage your weight in general.

After the servings and calories you are going to want to look at nutrient values of the food. Limit eating too much saturated and completely avoid trans fats, cholesterol, and refined sugar and sodium. Go for no sugar or salt added – you can always add your own Real Salt, Sucanat, raw honey, or Grade B Maple syrup before you eat it. Ideally you want to get more of the vitamins, minerals and dietary fiber.

Ideal Potency Considerations

Daily Values - the percent is based on the DV for a nutrient in a 2000-calorie diet.
Nutrients listed as % DV on label: Total Fat, Saturated Fat, Carbohydrates, Sodium, Total Carbohydrates, Fiber, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, Iron, Calcium.
Nutrients without % DV on label: Protein, Sugar, and Trans Fat.

All nutrients must be declared as percentages of the Daily Values. That is to stop the mistaken interpretations of foods:

1. For instance sodium listed at 140 mg could be considered high, but when the DV is seen to be 6% of the DV of 2400 mg, the true amount of sodium in the food is better understood.
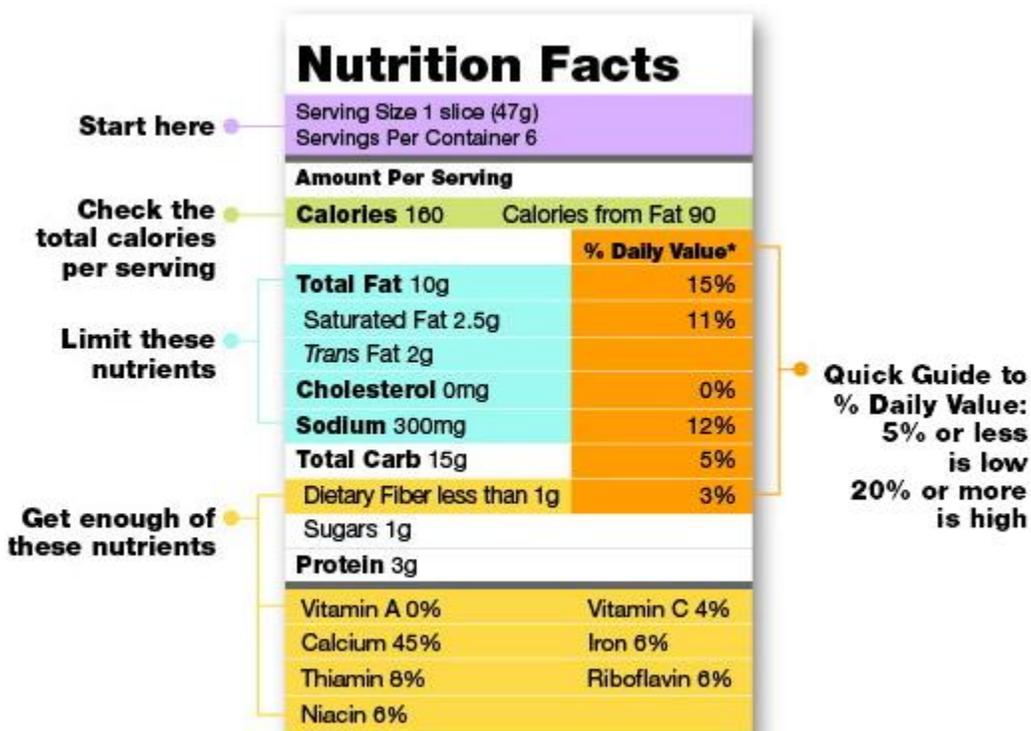
What to Look For

For those trying to avoid items like Dairy, Soy and Wheat it can be hard. Especially because of all the hidden names for these products.

Alternative names for **dairy**: milk, skim milk, cream evaporated milk, condensed milk, dried milk, butter, powdered milk, whey, lactose, caseinate, lactalbumin, cheese, curds, milk solids, yogurt, buttermilk, casein, lactate, sour cream, calcium caseinate.

Alternative names for **gluten**: wheat, barley or rye, breading, bread stuffing, bulgur, durum, farro, graham flour, hydrolyzed wheat protein, kamut, malt, malt extract, malt

syrup, malt flavoring, malt vinegar, malted milk, matzo, modified wheat starch, seitan (used in many vegetarian dishes), semolina, spelt, triticale, einkorn, emmer, farina, fu.

Alternative names for **soy**: soy protein, soy flour, soybean, soy lecithin, edamame (soybeans in pods), hydrolyzed soy protein, kinnoko flour, kyodofu (freeze dried tofu), miso, supro, tamari, tempeh, teriyaki sauce, tofu, yakidofu, yuba (bean curd). Remember that organic, non-GMO soy is a good source of vegetable protein, but has some cautionary concerns: soy contains phyto-estrogen, which can cause weight gain if you are already storing fat in the abdominal area, it feeds estrogen dependant cancers (breast, ovarian, uterine, cervical), and bonds with synthetic estrogen in plastics and compounds in the body and may produce cancer.

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4 Things to Look for on Nutritional Labeling

Don't Be Duped By The Claims on The Front

One of the best tips may be to completely ignore the labels on front of the packaging. Front labels try to lure you into purchasing products by making health claims. Manufacturers want to make you believe that their product is healthier than other, similar options.

This has actually been studied. Research shows that adding health claims to front labels affects people's choices. It makes them believe a product is healthier than the same product that doesn't list health claims.

Manufacturers are often dishonest in the way they use these labels. They tend to use health claims that are misleading, and in some cases downright false. Examples include many high-sugar breakfast cereals, like "whole grain" Cocoa Puffs. Despite the label, these products may have started out as whole grain (with lots of Roundup/glyphosates herbicide), but after serious processing didn't end up that way and are not healthy.

Look At the Ingredients List

Product ingredients are generally listed by quantity, from highest to lowest amount, but there is no regulatory agency for label content. That means that the first listed ingredient is what the manufacturer used the most of.

A good rule of thumb is to scan the first three ingredients, because they are the largest part of what you're eating.

If the first ingredients include refined grains, some sort of sugar or hydrogenated oils, you can be pretty sure that the product is unhealthy.

Instead, try to choose items that have whole foods listed as the first three ingredients.

Another good rule of thumb is if the ingredients list is longer than 2–3 lines, you can assume that the product is highly processed.

Watch Out For Serving Sizes

The backs of nutrition labels state how many calories and nutrients are in a single serving of the product.

However, these serving sizes are often much smaller portions than people generally eat in one sitting.

For example, one serving may be half a can of soda, a quarter of a cookie, half a chocolate bar or a single biscuit.

In this way, manufacturers try to deceive consumers into thinking that the food has fewer calories and less sugar than it actually does.

Many people are unaware of this serving size scheme. They often assume that the entire container is a single serving, while it may actually consist of two, three or more servings.

If you're interested in knowing the nutritional value of what you're eating, you have to multiply the serving given on the back by the number of servings you consumed.

The Most Misleading Labeling Claims – and What They Actually Mean

Health claims on packaged food are designed to catch your attention and convince you that the product is healthy.

Here are some of the most common ones, and what they actually mean:

- **Light:** Light products are processed to reduce either calories or fat, and some products are simply watered down. Check carefully to see if anything has been added instead, like sugar.

- **Multigrain:** This sounds very healthy, but basically just means that there is more than one type of grain in the product. These are most likely refined grains, unless the product is marked as whole grain.

- **Natural:** This does not necessarily mean that the product resembles anything natural. It simply means that at some point the manufacturer had a natural source (for example, apples or rice) to work with.

- **Organic:** This label says very little about whether the product is healthy or not. For example, organic sugar is still sugar. Only certified organically grown products can be guaranteed to be organic.

- **No added sugar:** Some products are naturally high in sugar. The fact that they don't have added sugar doesn't mean they're healthy. Unhealthy sugar substitutes may also have been added.

- **Low-calorie:** Low-calorie products have to contain 1/3 fewer calories than the *same* brand's original product. However, one brand's low-calorie version may contain similar calories as the original of another product.

- **Low-fat:** This label almost always means that the fat has been reduced at the cost of adding more sugar. Be very careful and read the ingredients listed on the back.

- **Low-carb:** Recently, low-carb diets have been linked with improved health. However, processed foods that are labeled low-carb are usually just processed junk foods, similar to processed low-fat junk foods.

- **Made with whole grain:** There is probably very little whole grain in the product. Check the ingredients list and see where the whole grain is placed. If it is not in the first 3 ingredients, then the amount is negligible.

- **Fortified or enriched:** This basically means that some synthetic nutrients have been added to the product, which is not the equivalent of nutrients that naturally occur in food. For example, vitamin D is often added to milk, and often renders the food unhealthy.

- **Gluten-free:** Gluten-free does not equal healthy. It simply means that the product doesn't contain wheat, spelt, rice, rye or barley. Many foods are gluten-free, but can be highly processed and loaded with unhealthy fats and sugar.

- **Fruit-flavored:** Many processed foods have a name that refers to a natural flavor, such as strawberry yogurt. However, there may not be any fruit in the product, only chemicals designed to taste like fruit.

- **Zero trans fat:** "Zero trans fat" actually means "less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving." So if serving sizes are misleadingly small, the product can actually contain a lot of trans fat.

Get to know the Nutrition Panel

If the food has a claim such as "good source of fiber" or "contains B vitamins for energy" then the NP (Nutrition Panel) must provide additional information about the nutrient levels of those nutrients as well. A good rule of thumb is to look for products higher in protein, fiber (where relevant), vitamins and minerals and lower in saturated fat, added sugars and sodium.

Compare apples with apples

Actually that is probably not the best example, given that fresh produce doesn't have a food label! But you know what I mean. It goes without saying that a breakfast cereal has a different nutritional profile to a yogurt, so don't waste time seeing which one contains more sugar. So be sure to compare breads with breads, breakfast cereals with breakfast cereals, frozen meals with frozen meals etc.

Read the ingredients list and look for alternative names

All ingredients are deemed to be declared and are listed in descending order of weight. A good tip is to look out for where added sugar, salt or fat are listed. If they are amongst the first two or three ingredients, the product is unlikely to be the healthiest choice (providing of course that there are more than two or three ingredients!).

- Anything that ends in 'ose' is another name for sugar, e.g. fructose, glucose, maltose, sucrose, dextrose..
- Other ingredients that contain fat include coconut, lard, copha, monoglycerides, vegetable oil and hydrogenated oils.
- Finally sodium can be disguised as booster, monosodium glutamate (MSG), stock powder, rock salt and sodium bicarbonate.