

Reading Food Labels

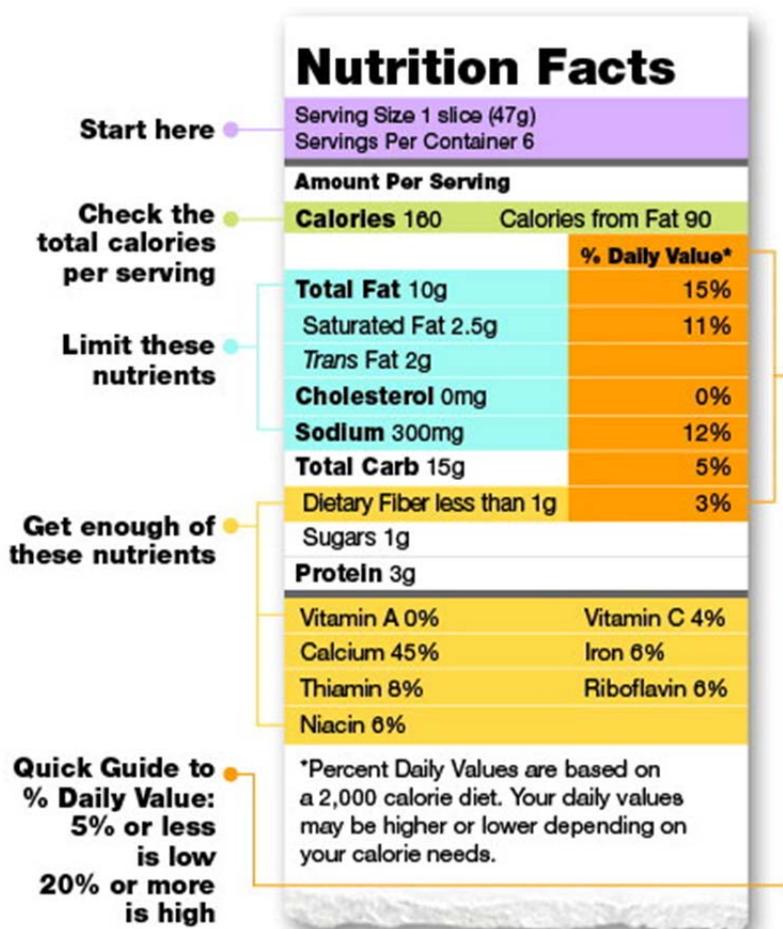
When choosing your food, use the food label to help you make the healthiest choices. There are up to four important sources of information on packages of food: 1) the Nutrition Facts panel, 2) the list of ingredients in the food if it's a manufactured or "processed" food, 3) the nutrient claims (if any), and the health claim (if any).

The Nutrition Facts Panel

This panel contains information specific to the product in the package in terms of serving size, calories, and nutrient information. The example below is a generic label.

1. Start with the serving size.

Note the size of one serving and how many servings are in the package (or can or container). All the information in the panel refers to one serving's worth of that food. Ask yourself "How many servings am I eating?" For this product, if you ate the whole package, you would be eating six servings, which greatly increases the calories and other nutrients. It's not likely that you'll mistakenly eat six servings of something but it is common for packages to contain two servings and for someone to eat the entire package thinking it's a single serving so read labels carefully.



Label source: American Heart Association

2. Secondly, check calories.

The number of calories is will tell you how much energy you will get from this food. Notice on this label that more than half the calories come from fat, which means this food isn't your best choice on a regular basis. Still want some? Choose to eat a half serving, which cuts the calories in half.

3. Limit these nutrients.

This part of the label gives you the total fat, and the amount of saturated fat, *trans* fat, and cholesterol. It also gives you the amount of sodium. Each of these should be limited to the amount that's thought to be healthy for humans (30% total fat, no *trans* fat, 300 milligrams/day cholesterol, and 2300-2400 milligrams of sodium, which is 1 teaspoon of table salt). Too much fat can lead to heart disease and obesity; too much sodium can lead to high blood pressure and kidney disease.

Use the 5/20 rule: 5% or less is "low" and desirable; 20% or more is "high" and too much. Keep each of these nutrients at 5% or less of the % Daily Value. Eliminate *trans* fat completely.

4. Get enough of these 5 nutrients.

Be sure to get 100% of the fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron needed each day. Again, use the 5/20 rule: 5% or less is "low"; 20% or more is "high". Choose foods that are 20% or higher.

| Nutrient | Amount/Day | Where Do We Find This Nutrient? |
|----------------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dietary Fiber | 25-35 grams | Fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, seeds No dietary fiber in meats, fish, poultry, or dairy products. |
| Vitamin A | 5,000 IU* | Dark green leafy vegetables, yellow/orange vegetables and fruits, liver, fish liver oils, dairy products |
| Vitamin C | 60 milligrams | Citrus fruits and juices, broccoli, cauliflower, green pepper, strawberries, tomatoes |
| Calcium | 1000 milligrams | Dairy products, calcium-fortified foods, dark green leafy vegetables, legumes, some brands of tofu, almonds |
| Iron | Varies by sex and age: | Lean meats, fish, poultry, legumes, nuts, seeds, whole grains, dark molasses, and green leafy vegetables |
| Men ≥ 19y | 8 milligrams | |
| Women 19-50y | 18 milligrams | |
| Postmenopausal | 8 milligrams | |

* IU = International Units

5. Footnote

Details on how % Daily Value is calculated and what the target levels of fats, sodium, carbohydrates, and dietary fiber are per day.

6. % Daily Value (or “% DV”)

The % Daily Value is based on a 2000 calorie diet, which may be more or less than your particular needs. Use the %DV to compare one product or brand to a similar product. Make sure the serving

sizes are similar and then you can compare which product gives you closer to the level you want, 5% or less for the nutrients to limit (fats and sodium) and 20% or more for the nutrients you want more of (vitamins A and C, calcium, and iron).

Quick guide to % DV. The % DV section tells you the percent of each nutrient in a single serving, in terms of the daily recommended amount. As a guide, if you want to consume less of a nutrient (such as saturated fat, cholesterol or sodium), choose foods with a lower % DV — 5 percent or less is low. If you want to consume more of a nutrient (such as fiber), seek foods with a higher % DV — 20 percent or more is high.

Here are more tips for getting as much health information as possible from the Nutrition Facts label:

- Remember that the information shown in these panels is based on 2,000 calories a day. You may need to consume less or more than 2,000 calories depending upon your age, gender, activity level, and whether you're trying to lose, gain or maintain your weight. Find out your personal daily limits on [My Fats Translator](#).
- In general, as you think about the amount of calories in a food per serving, remember that for a 2,000-calorie diet:
 - 40 calories per serving is considered low;
 - 100 calories per serving is considered moderate; and
 - 400 calories or more per serving is considered high.
- There is no % DV shown for *trans* fat on the panel because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not have enough scientific information to set this value. We recommend eating less than 20 calories or (less than two grams of *trans* fat) a day – that's less than 1 percent of your total daily calories (for a 2,000-calorie-a-day diet).
- When the Nutrition Facts panel says the food contains "0 g" of *trans* fat, it means the food contains less than 0.5 grams of *trans* fat **per serving**.
- When the Nutrition Facts label says a food contains "0 g" of *trans* fat, but includes "partially hydrogenated oil" in the ingredient list, it means the food contains *trans* fat, but less than 0.5 grams of *trans* fat per serving. So, if you eat more than one serving, you could quickly reach your daily limit of *trans* fat.

In addition to the Nutrition Facts label, a lot of foods today also come with nutrient content claims provided by the manufacturer. These claims are typically featured in ads for the foods or in the promotional copy on the food packages themselves. They are strictly defined by the FDA. The chart below provides some of the most commonly used nutrient content claims, along with a detailed description of what the claim means.

7. Check the amount of protein.

Remember that 7 grams (1 ounce) is one protein serving. Particularly when choosing carbohydrate foods such as cereals, select one that has more than the usual 2-4 grams protein/serving. Some cereals can provide much higher levels.

The Ingredient List

Ingredients are listed in descending order of weight, from most to least. Look for added sugars or sweeteners. Names that mean added sugars are corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, maltose, dextrose, sucrose, honey, maple syrup, and fruit juice concentrate (contains beneficial nutrients but also contains sugar from the fruit). Also look for other food additives. If you don't recognize the terms or the terms aren't health-promoting, consider not eating the food.

Tips

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Nutrient Content Claims

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IF A FOOD CLAIMS TO BE...

Calories and Sugar

Calorie free

Sugar free

Fat

Fat free

Low fat

Reduced fat or less fat

Low in saturated fat

Lean

Extra lean

Light (lite)

Cholesterol

Cholesterol free

Low cholesterol

Reduced cholesterol

IT MEANS THAT ONE SERVING OF THE PRODUCT CONTAINS...

Less than 5 calories

Less than 0.5 grams of sugar

Less than 0.5 grams of fat

3 grams of fat or less

At least 25 percent less fat than the regular product

1 gram of saturated fat or less, with not more than 15 percent of the calories coming from saturated fat

Less than 10 grams of fat, 4.5 grams of saturated fat and 95 milligrams of cholesterol

Less than 5 grams of fat, 2 grams of saturated fat and 95 milligrams of cholesterol

At least one-third fewer calories or no more than half the fat of the regular product, or no more than half the sodium of the regular product

Less than 2 milligrams of cholesterol and 2 grams (or less) of saturated fat

20 or fewer milligrams of cholesterol and 2 grams or less of saturated fat

At least 25 percent less cholesterol than the regular product and 2

| | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | grams or less of saturated fat |
| Sodium | |
| Sodium free or no sodium | Less than 5 milligrams of sodium and no sodium chloride in ingredients |
| Very low sodium | 35 milligrams or less of sodium |
| Low sodium | 140 milligrams or less of sodium |
| Reduced or less sodium | At least 25 percent less sodium than the regular product |
| Fiber | |
| High fiber | 5 grams or more of fiber |
| Good source of fiber | 2.5 to 4.9 grams of fiber |

If you can't remember the definitions of all of the terms, use these general guidelines instead:

- "Free" means a food has the least possible amount of the specified nutrient.
- "Very Low" and "Low" means the food has a little more than foods labeled "Free."
- "Reduced" or "Less" mean the food has 25 percent less of a specific nutrient than the regular version of the food.