Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label

# Knowing what is in the food you eat is helpful to checking food intake and making healthy choices.

Food labeling is required by the FDA to be put on packaged foods like breads, canned foods, drinks, etc. The labels must have the name of the food, its net weight, manufacturing information, an ingredient list, nutrition information and potential allergens. Taking time to know what food labels mean can help you make healthy choices. Food labels give you clues as to what you are eating. Being able to understand those clues is what will help you make healthier choices.

All of the information on the Nutrition Facts Label is for one serving. Usually there is more than one serving in a container. Be sure to look at the serving size and servings per container when deciding how much of a meal or snack you will eat. When there is an amount bigger than the serving size, it increases the number of calories and other nutrients from what is on the label. The information about serving size is found at the very top of the Nutrition Facts Label.

Found below the serving size information is the calorie count. The calorie count is written per serving. The new label has calories in larger print so it is easier for people to spot.

Next on the label, found below the calorie information, is total fat.

* The four major groups of dietary fat are monounsaturated, polyunsaturated, saturated, and trans fats.
* Unsaturated fats have a special structure that keeps them liquid at room temperature. They come from plant sources in two forms: monounsaturated (such as olive oil) and polyunsaturated (such as corn, canola, or soybean oil). They are called heart healthy fats. They help your body absorb fat soluble vitamins (A, D, E, K). They help keep cell membrane structure. And they act as a storage source of energy that is used between meals.
* Companies do not have to list the amount of unsaturated fat in a food, but you can figure it. Try subtracting the saturated fat and trans fats from the total fat count. The amount of fat that you have left is the amount of unsaturated fat.
* Saturated fats (such as butter, shortening, and lard) are solid at room temperature. They come from animal sources, except palm and coconut oil. These fats are not heart healthy and should not be eaten very much.
* Trans fats are fats that were once unsaturated and then chemically altered. This makes them solid at room temperature. These fats are bad news. The less trans fat you eat, the better. As of 2020, no foods produced in the United States will be made using trans fats.

Below the total fat section on the Nutrition Facts Label, there is a section about cholesterol and sodium.

* Cholesterol is needed for every cell in your body. It helps to form hormones, vitamin D, and digestive elements. You create all the cholesterol you need in your liver. It is okay to have some cholesterol in your diet.
* Sodium is an electrolyte that helps balance the fluids in your body. If too much sodium is in the body, blood pressure will get too high. This is called hypertension. High blood pressure will put you at risk for things such as heart disease, certain cancers, kidney disease, or a stroke. Try to choose foods that are low in sodium.

Next on the Nutrition Facts Label, the total carbohydrates are listed.

* Carbohydrates are mostly plant-based foods such as grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes. They give the body energy.
* Total carbohydrates include the total amount of natural sugar, added sugar, starches and fiber in a food.
* Dietary fiber is a non-digestible form of carbohydrates. It helps with digestion and prevents sickness. 14 grams of fiber for every 1,000 calories eaten can help.
* Total sugar includes both natural and added sugars. Natural sugars are sugars that naturally occur in foods. For example, lactose in milk products and fructose in fruit or vegetables.
* Added sugars refers to sugar added to a product to sweeten it when it’s getting made. Try to eat less than 10% of your daily calories in added sugars.

After the total carbohydrate section, there is a section on protein.

* Proteins help a lot in the body. They help to keep your body from getting sick. Proteins also keep your hair and nails strong, and supply energy. They balance fluids and help take nutrients throughout the body.
* In the U.S. protein deficiency is not as common as in other countries. Without enough protein, protein-related malnutrition can happen. Bones could get weaker.
* Eating too much protein can lead to other health concerns. These include kidney stones, heart problems, and some cancers. It is important to eat a balance of about 5½ ounces per day from a variety of food sources.

Micronutrients are in the section following the section with protein information.

* Vitamins are split into two main parts: water-soluble and fat-soluble. It is important to eat enough vitamins in your diet. Vitamins help with growth, reproduction and health. When you get vitamins from food, it is very rare that too many vitamins are eaten. You can get too many vitamins when you take vitamin supplements. Too many vitamins can be toxic. Vitamin D is the only vitamin that needs to be listed on the label. Food companies may choose to include other vitamins. Vitamin D helps with healthy bones and teeth. Vitamin D also helps the body not get sick.
* Minerals are other micronutrients needed in your body. Nutrition labels must list calcium, iron, and potassium. Calcium helps to make the bones stronger. Iron carries oxygen from the lungs to various tissues in need. Not having enough iron in your blood can cause dizziness, nausea, or lightheadedness. Potassium helps with muscle contraction, lowering blood pressure. It also helps with making bones stronger, and balancing fluids in the body.

Labeled last on the Nutrition Facts Label is the ingredient list.

* Look for these key factors for a quick understanding of the nutrition facts label. First, how many ingredients are there? It is good to choose foods with not very many ingredients. With a smaller list there are usually less unhealthy things. The other thing to notice is what the first ingredient is and what the last ingredient is. Ingredients are listed in order of the most used to least used. If you have a label that lists all sugars first and healthier ingredients at the end, you might want to rethink it.

Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label can sometimes be scary. With practice, you will get better. This will help you make healthier choices and eat healthier.

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