

Making Sense Out of Food Labels

Claims on food packages can be confusing. Knowing what is in food may help you to make healthier choices. Reading food labels is the best way to get information about what is in your foods. This can help you make better choices and eat healthier overall.

Nutrition Facts

- 1. Look for the Nutrition Facts on the food label.** The numbers on this illustration match the numbers in the Nutrition Facts section of this handout. Refer back to this page as you learn what each item means.
- 2. Serving Size:** The amount of food recommended to be eaten at one time. All of the following nutrition information is based on this serving size. For instance, if you ate 2 servings, you would need to double the numbers listed below. Also note how many servings are in the entire container to help estimate what one serving size looks like.
- 3. Calories:** The average adult needs about 2,000 calories a day from food and beverages. Use this number to help determine if this product fits into your daily eating plan or not. Too many calories each day can lead to weight gain.
- 4. Fat:** Not all fat is created equal. There are 4 types of fat in our foods: saturated fat, trans fat, monounsaturated fat, and polyunsaturated fat. The FDA only requires that food manufacturers list saturated fat and trans fat on their Nutrition Facts labels, but sometimes you might find all 4 types listed.

Nutrition Facts	
6 servings per container	
Serving size	1 cup (140g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	170
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 8g	10%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 5mg	0%
Total Carbohydrate 22g	8%
Dietary Fiber 2g	7%
Total Sugars 16g	
Includes 8g Added Sugars	16%
Protein 2g	
Vitamin D 0mcg	0%
Calcium 20mg	2%
Iron 1mg	6%
Potassium 240mg	6%

*The % Daily Value tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Source: Adapted from U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Too much saturated fat or trans fat in the diet can lead to health problems, such as heart disease or cancer. An average adult following a 2,000 calorie diet should aim to limit total fat to 45 to 75 grams per day (20-35% total calories), saturated fat to 11 to 13 grams per day (5-6% total calories), and trans fat should be avoided as much as possible. Check the list below to see how much you should have if you eat a different amount of calories per day.

If your daily calorie total is:	Your total fat limit fat per day is:	Your saturated fat limit per day is:
2,000 calories	45 to 75 grams	11 to 13 grams
1,800 calories	40 to 70 grams	10 to 12 grams
1,500 calories	35 to 60 grams	8 to 10 grams
1,200 calories	25 to 45 grams	6 to 8 grams

Note: Although the food label may say the food item has 0 grams of trans fat, it may contain up to 0.5 gram per serving. The best way to check for trans fats is to look at the ingredient list and look for “partially hydrogenated oils.” If you see these words, try to find an alternative product made with different ingredients.

5. **Cholesterol:** Cholesterol is found in animal products, such as cheese, egg yolks, milk, and butter. Eating too many of these foods can increase your risk for heart disease. Try to limit total cholesterol intake to 300 mg per day. If you are at risk for heart disease or have type 2 diabetes, 200 mg per day is the maximum recommended amount. Plant-based foods do not contain any cholesterol.
6. **Sodium:** Many processed foods contain sodium, which acts as a preservative and adds flavor. Most Americans eat too much sodium. Keeping your sodium intake low may decrease high blood pressure and lower your risk for stroke, heart disease, and kidney disease. The 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggests limiting sodium intake to no more than 2,300 mg per day although some older individuals or those with high blood pressure may want to limit this intake even more.
Guideline: Look for foods that have less than 300 mg of sodium per serving. Watch the number of servings of any food you eat.
7. **Total Carbohydrates:** Carbohydrates are in foods like bread, pasta, potatoes, fruits, and vegetables. Some individuals, like those with diabetes, may want to control the amount of carbohydrate that they have with their meals and snacks.
8. **Dietary Fiber:** Fiber is the bulk part of grains, beans, peas, fruits, and vegetables. Fiber helps the body’s digestive system work well and may help lower the risk of some cancers and heart disease. If you want to increase your fiber intake, look for foods with at least 3 grams of fiber per serving.
9. **Added Sugar:** Some sugars are naturally occurring, like those in fruit, and others are added during the processing or packaging of foods. Too many of these “added sugars” can increase your risk for developing diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and other health conditions. Aim to limit added sugar intake to 10% of total calories, or about 30 to 55 grams per day for most people. Make sure to check beverages for added sugar content.
10. **Protein:** Protein can help to build muscle, regulate hormones and is involved in immune function. Most individuals should aim for about 60 to 100 grams of protein per day.

11. Vitamins and Minerals: Most Americans are not meeting the recommended amount of these nutrients each day. Look for food products that are a good source of these nutrients. Your goal is to reach 100% of each for the day.

12. % Daily Value: Daily values are the percentage of nutrients the product provides based on a diet of 2,000 calories per day. Your nutrient needs may be less or more than the Daily Value depending on your individual health concerns. For certain nutrients, like sodium and added sugar, aim for lower percentages. For other nutrients, like fiber, vitamins, and minerals, aim for 100% a day.

The ingredient list

In addition to the Nutrition Facts Label, look at a product's ingredient list to help you make better food selections. The ingredient list tells you what is in the food. Manufacturers list ingredients by weight in order of greatest amount to least amount in the food. It is a valuable resource for people with food allergies. Use the table to help you identify ingredients that are high in a nutrient.

Nutrient	Common Ingredients
Sodium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baking powder • Baking soda • Monosodium glutamate • Salt (regular or sea salt) • Sodium
Cholesterol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any animal fats • Lard • High fat products, such as whole milk and cheese
Saturated and Trans Fats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any animal fats except fish • Coconut butter • Coconut oil • Palm oil • Partially hydrogenated oils
Sugar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown sugar • Carob powder • Corn syrup/solids • Dextrin • Dextrose • Fructose • Glucose • High fructose corn syrup • Honey • Invert sugar • Lactose • Mannose • Molasses • Sucrose

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