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Nutrition Labels – What They Tell Us

2010

The information found on the Nutrition Facts label gives us the power to understand and make informed choices about the foods and drinks we consume. Knowing how to read these labels gives us the ability to make more informed choices about health for ourselves and others.

Some Quick Points...

- Nutrition labeling became mandatory for all prepackaged foods on December 12, 2007.
- The Nutrition Facts table appears on prepackaged foods and has a consistent look, making it easier to find and read.
- There are standard rules that companies must use when labeling or advertising foods.
- **Together, the Nutrition Facts table, the nutrition claims and the ingredient list provide Canadians with the information needed to make better-informed food choices.**
- **Most companies also have nutritional information on their websites or available through a toll-free number.**

Understanding the Claims Foods Make...

Claims for calories

Calorie free..... fewer than 5/serving
 Low calorie..... 40 or fewer/serving

Claims for fat

Fat free..... fewer than .5g/serving
 Low fat..... 3g or less of total

Claims for sodium

Sodium free..... fewer than 5mg/serving
 Very low sodium..... 35mg or fewer/serving
 Low sodium..... 140mg or fewer/serving

Claims for cholesterol

Cholesterol free..... fewer than 2mg/serving
 Low cholesterol..... 20mg or fewer/serving

Claims for sugar

Sugar free..... fewer than 5g/serving

Claims for fiber

High fiber..... 5g or more/serving
 Good source of fiber.... 2.5g to 4.9g/serving

It is important to know that claims of “reduced” or “less” mean at least a 25% reduction from that brand’s regular version of that product. Compare similar brands before deciding on which is best for you.

How to Read and Understand Nutritional Labels

Serving Size is very specific. The information listed on any nutrition label is for the listed serving size. You must change the totals if you eat more or less than the listed serving size. Take note of references to specific sizes or quantities such as “2 cookies,” “1 container” or “17 chips.” This can help you measure serving size.

Calories are calculated as the total number in one serving. To lose weight you need to eat fewer calories than your body burns.

Total Fat tells you how much fat is in a food. It includes fats that are good for you and fats that are not so good for you (saturated and trans-fats).

Fat is high in calories. One gram of fat has more than twice the calories of carbohydrates or proteins. Although some types of fats are healthy, it is important to pay attention to the total number of calories that you consume to maintain a healthy weight.

Sodium tells you how much salt/sodium is in a serving. With many foods you can taste how salty they are, such as pickles. But there is also hidden salt in many foods like cheeses, salad dressings, and other packaged foods. Reading labels can help you compare the sodium in different foods. Adults should aim for less than 2400 mg per day.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size (144g)
Servings Per Container

Amount Per Serving

Calories 170 **Calories from Fat 80**

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 9g **14%**

Saturated Fat 3.5g **18%**

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 0mg **0%**

Sodium 60mg **3%**

Total Carbohydrate 22g 7%

Dietary Fiber 3g 12%

Sugars 16g

Protein 3g

Vitamin A 10% • Vitamin C 15%

Calcium 2% • Iron 4%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

		Calories	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less Than	65g	80g	
Saturated Fat	Less Than	20g	25g	
Cholesterol	Less Than	300mg	300mg	
Sodium	Less Than	2,400mg	2,400mg	
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g	
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g	

Calories per gram:
Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4

Myth 1

Myth: Eating most of your calories in the evening can promote weight gain.
Fact: No matter when you eat them, you gain weight when you eat more calories than you burn off.

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Total Carbohydrate on the label includes sugar, complex carbohydrate, and fiber as a combined total.

Dietary Fibre is the part of plant foods that is not digested. Dried beans, fruits, vegetables and grains are all good sources of fibre. We should try to eat 25-30 grams of fibre per day.

Sugar alcohols have fewer calories than sugars and starches. Use of sugar alcohols does not mean the product is low in carbohydrate or calories. Always refer to the Total Carbohydrate.

Percent (%) Daily Value indicates how much of a specific nutrient one serving contains compared to recommendations for a whole day. The percentage is based on a 2000-calorie diet. If you eat more or fewer calories, your Daily Values would change. This percentage is a useful tool to check if a food is high or low in a particular nutrient, such as fat or fibre.

Vitamins and Minerals shows how much of the daily recommended vitamins and minerals are contained in one serving of this particular food. Our goal should be to reach 100% of these recommended amounts each day.

Myth 2

Myth: Less or reduced fats, sugars, sodium, etc., on labels means that a food is healthy.

Fact: This does not mean that the food is low in these ingredients. The food is lower in fat, sugar, sodium, etc., than the regular sort, but may still contain a high amount of those ingredients.

List of Ingredients:

All packaged foods sold must have a clearly written list of ingredients. Often the lists are not clear because of technical or scientific names. This is especially important if you are trying to avoid specific foods like nuts, wheat, or other allergens. Ingredients are listed in the order of the amount found in the food. The first ingredient makes up the largest proportion of the food and contains less of each ingredient listed after.

The ingredient list is also a good place to look for healthy ingredients such as soy, monounsaturated fats such as olive, canola or peanut oils, and whole grains like whole grains, whole wheat flour and oats.

Added Sugar

Food with added sugar will list corn syrup, fruit juice concentrates, honey, molasses, etc. on their ingredient list.

Other names for added sugars can include:

- high-fructose corn syrup
- dextrose
- fructose
- glucose
- lactose
- maltose
- malt syrup
- sucrose

Whole Grains

The ingredient list can also help you find foods made with whole grains, which are healthier. Here is a sample of whole grains that may be listed:

- whole wheat
- brown rice
- graham flour
- whole corn
- wild rice
- whole oats
- bulgur
- oatmeal
- whole rye

Caution: food labeled with the words multi-grain, 100% wheat, seven-grain, stone-ground, bran, or cracked wheat does not necessarily contain whole grains.

Trans Fats

Although the amount of trans fats is listed on food labels, knowing which of the ingredients are the trans fats can be more difficult, making them hard to avoid. If the ingredients list “partially hydrogenated vegetable oil” the food can have trans fats.

Useful Resources: Health Canada provides extensive and accurate information regarding all issues related to food nutrition. See http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/nutrition/index_e.html for more information about food nutrition labeling.

For more information about allergy alerts and food recalls see:

<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/corpaffr/recarapp/recaltoce.shtml>

Putting It Into Perspective: At first glance, Nutritional Labels can appear confusing and feeling like you need a Ph.D. in Mathematics to read them is not uncommon. With some practice and the information in this Tip Sheet you can become a more informed consumer, one with the power to make food choices and comparisons based on available facts found on the labels of the foods you eat. This power can greatly enhance your ability to eat healthier.