

A Guide to Reading Nutrition Labels

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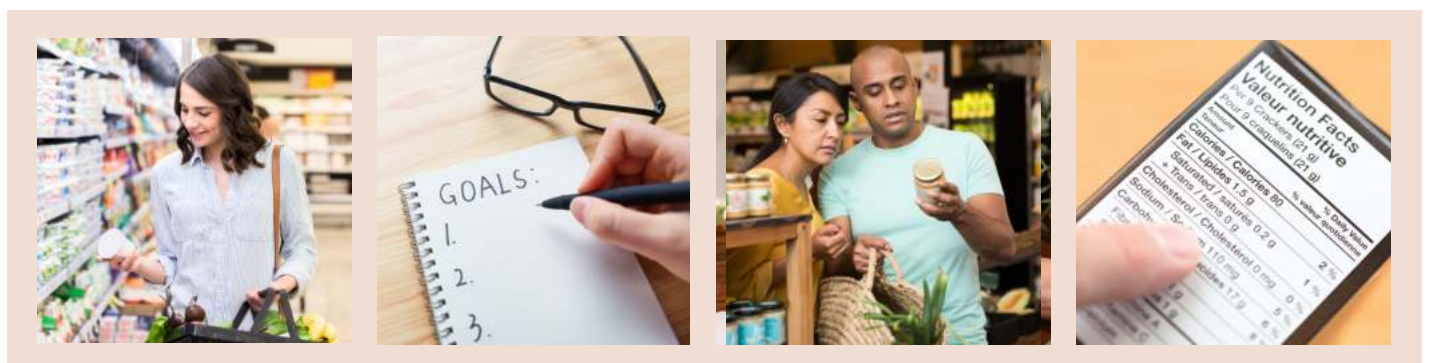
Although health enthusiasts gravitate towards whole foods that don't have labels on packaging, nutrition labels are a tool to help consumers make informed food choices. With the rise of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, it is more important than ever to understand how to read and interpret nutrition labels correctly.

Nutrition labeling is required for most prepared foods in the United States. Most manufacturers of brand-name supermarkets, fast food chains, vending machines, and other food purveyors must follow specific guidelines when providing nutrition information on their food products. However, restaurants are generally exempt from the requirement to share nutritional information on the food they serve, although this situation may change in the future. This guide will cover the key components of a nutrition label and provide tips on using this information to make healthier food choices.

Understanding a Nutrition Label

The serving size is the first aspect to consider when reading a nutrition label. Because daily calorie intake ranges by age and activity level, the serving size tells you how much of the product is typically consumed and is not a recommendation for how much you should eat or drink. People often overlook serving size and consume more calories, fat, and sugar than they realize. Be mindful that many products have multiple serving sizes within one package. If you choose to eat more than one serving, adjust the listed quantities of the nutrients accordingly to get a true sense of how much you are consuming. It is always best to measure the actual amount of food you are eating against the serving size and servings per container.

Next, pay attention to the calories per serving. Here, you can find the total number of calories per serving and the calories derived from fat.





This gives you a general idea of how energy-dense the food is. Carbohydrates, fats, and proteins are the three main food components that provide calories. Carbohydrates and proteins each provide four calories per gram, while one gram of fat provides nine calories. Alcohol is also a source of calories, with about seven calories in each gram. Consuming a moderate amount of calories while still meeting your nutritional needs is generally recommended for a healthy diet. Remember that the number of calories needed depends on factors such as age, gender, activity level, and overall health. After calories, look at the breakdown of macronutrients - carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. Carbohydrates and fats are the body's primary energy sources, while proteins are essential for building and repairing tissues. It is important to select foods to balance your intake of all three macronutrients and ensure you are getting a variety of micronutrients, vitamins and minerals, in your diet.

Another critical component of a nutrition label is the list of ingredients, which can give you valuable information about the quality of your food. Ingredients are listed by weight, from most to least. The first three to five ingredients are crucial because they indicate the most significant food components. If the first few ingredients are whole grains, for example, the product is likely to be a good source of fiber. Try to choose foods with a short list of simple, recognizable ingredients and avoid products with added sugars, artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives. In addition to the nutritional content, nutrition labels provide information on vitamins and minerals. These are essential for overall health and well-being and crucial to various bodily functions. Primarily consume foods high in vitamins and minerals, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.

" Remember that the number of calories needed depends on factors such as age, gender, activity level, and overall health."



When reading nutrition labels, another important factor is the percent daily value (%DV) listed for each nutrient. This tells you how much of a specific nutrient one serving of the food contributes to your daily intake based on a 2,000-calorie diet. Use the %DV to compare different products and choose the best fit for your dietary needs. When interpreting the %DV, remember that it is based on a general 2,000-calorie diet and may not be accurate for everyone. You may need to adjust your nutrient intake if you have special dietary needs or goals, such as weight loss or muscle gain.

Consult with a healthcare provider or nutritionist for personalized advice. When reading the DV nutrition percentage, consider the following guidelines to determine if the product provides your desired nutrition:

- 5% DV or less is a little of a nutrient and is considered low.
- 20% DV or more is a lot of a nutrient and is considered high.

You can use the %DV to:

- Gauge the general nutrition of foods.
- Compare products and choose the better one for you.
- Evaluate and see if a food is high or low in a nutrient.
- Determine if a serving of food contributes a lot or a little of a nutrient to your diet.

Lastly, allergen information is also provided on a nutrition label. All labels of a food that contains an ingredient that is a "major food allergen" must declare the presence of the allergen in the manner specified by the law. The law specifies soy/soybeans, milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, sesame, and food ingredients that contain protein derived from these foods as major food allergens. Labeling is required unless an exemption applies. If the common name is used, the major allergen will appear on the ingredient list as "milk" or "wheat." However, if a major allergen's common name is not used in the ingredients list, the manufacturer must include the common name in parentheses after the listed ingredient or in a "contains statement" near the ingredient list. Sesame was included in this requirement on January 1, 2023, so foods made prior may not contain this information. It's also important to note that not all food labels will have a "contains statement." Therefore, looking at the ingredients and speaking with your healthcare provider for additional guidance is essential for individuals with food allergies.

Here is an at-a-glance view of how nutrition labels are structured and what they mean.



Serving Size: This is the first place you should look on a nutrition label, as all the following information pertains to this serving size. **Calories:** This lists the number of calories, a measure of energy, in one food serving.

Nutrients and Percentage Daily Value (%DV): The first part of this section lists the macronutrients contained in the food, and the second part lists the micronutrients, along with the %DV. The %DV is based on a 2,000-calorie diet, and it allows you to compare different foods and decide which is the healthier option for you. Make special note of the added sugars.

Footnote at the Bottom of the Label: This section provides more information about the %DV. It states that the %DV is based on a 2,000-calorie diet and explains that this caloric amount is based on general nutrition advice.

Ingredients List: The ingredients list is usually separate from the nutrition facts but should be nearby. Ingredients are listed by weight, from most to least. The first three to five ingredients are crucial because they indicate the most significant food components.

Allergen information: The label may include an allergen statement that addresses nine major food allergens. The allergen would either appear as its common name (i.e., milk), in parentheses after an ingredient that contains this allergen, or in a “contains statement” immediately following or next to the ingredient list.

Conclusion

Reading and understanding nutrition labels is a valuable skill that can help you make informed and healthy food choices. By paying attention to serving sizes, calories, macronutrients, ingredients, vitamins, minerals, %DV, and other factors, you can ensure that you are fueling your body with the nutrients it needs to thrive. Remember that nutrition labels are a tool to guide you toward better health, but ultimately, the best diet is balanced, varied, and sustainable for your individual needs and preferences.

If you want to learn more about nutrition, consider enrolling in our Certified Nutritional Consultant program. After completing this program, you can guide others on their wellness journeys and teach them about making healthy food choices. To learn more or enroll, visit trinityschool.org/programs/cnc or call 800-428-0408, option 2.

References

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