

Read Your Labels

by Jennifer Pirtle

Interpreting the Nutrition Facts isn't always easy. Our experts show you how

In an ideal world, we'd make every meal from scratch, with only the freshest whole foods available—straight from the farm to our plates. In the real world, however, the constraints imposed by full-time jobs and family responsibilities (who has time to wait for dough to rise?) make using some packaged foods unavoidable. So in the pursuit of good health, do the next best thing: Read and understand the Nutrition Facts. As our experts point out, this label can deceive the well-intentioned consumer, but not if you know how to interpret the numbers.

SERVING SIZE

"People often glance at the calories without realizing they may be consuming more than one serving," explains Lichtenstein. This oversight can double—or even triple—your intake of calories, fat, and sodium. Always check to see how many servings the product contains and what constitutes a single serving.

TOTAL FAT

Not all fats are unhealthy, so a brief glimpse at the total fat content won't reveal much and may even steer you away from foods that could benefit your health, such as nuts or fish. Instead, take a look at the saturated and trans fat numbers. These bad fats raise cholesterol and increase the risk for heart disease. Since food manufacturers can legally round down 0.5 grams of trans fat to zero, look for partially hydrogenated oils in the ingredients list. If you see any, the product contains trans fats.

CHOLESTEROL

Your body makes all the cholesterol you need, and consuming additional amounts may up your risk of heart disease. Since only animals make the fatty substance, "cholesterol-free" labels on plant-based products (such as peanut butter) don't mean much; this claim doesn't mean one brand is healthier than another.

PROTEIN

The Food and Nutrition Board sets the recommended range of protein between 10 and 35 grams per day, yet many Americans eat far more than that. Experts believe that piling on the protein strains the body's ability to process waste, especially for people who already have kidney problems. And prioritize the quality of your protein, says Augustine, by eating a variety of lean, nutrient-rich sources like fish, tempeh, and beans. When you eat animal protein, avoid going overboard by remembering that one serving is roughly the size of a deck of cards.

SODIUM

Watch your sodium numbers carefully. Many health organizations suggest limiting sodium intake to between 1,500 mg and 2,400 mg a day, but the typical American diet contains a whopping 3,300 mg daily (three-quarters of it from processed foods such as cereals, crackers, and soups). If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, or kidney disease, your doctor will have you aim for less than 1,500 mg per day.

OTHER NUTRIENTS

Most foods contain a variety of nutrients, but only a few are listed on labels. Vitamins A, C, and D, calcium, and iron are "leader nutrients," says Erb. "If you're eating adequate amounts of these, the others tend to follow." (See "% Daily Value," right.)

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1/2 cup (113g)
Servings Per Container about 6

Amount Per Serving

Calories 70 **Calories from Fat 45**

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 5g **8%**

 Saturated Fat 0.5g **3%**

 Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 0 mg **0%**

Sodium 540 mg **22%**

Total Carbohydrate 5g **2%**

 Dietary Fiber 1g **5%**

 Sugars 3g

Protein 1g

Vitamin A 10% • Vitamin C 40%

Calcium 2% • Iron 4%

* Percent Daily Value are based on a 2,000 calorie diet



CALORIES

Many consumers have tunnel vision when it comes to this number. Keep in mind, though, that not all calories are nutritionally equal. A can of soda, for example, offers far fewer nutrients than its approximate caloric equivalent, two slices of whole-grain bread. Also pay attention to “calories from fat” —no more than 30 percent of your diet should come from fat calories.

% DAILY VALUE

These percentages help consumers assess their intake of certain nutrients based on a daily diet of 2,000 to 2,500 calories. But as Augustine points out, not everyone has the same nutritional needs. “If women are sedentary, their caloric needs for weight maintenance are closer to 1,500 calories.” This one-size-fits-all approach also doesn’t account for existing health conditions, such as high blood pressure, which requires a reduced intake of sodium.

TOTAL CARBOHYDRATE

Thanks to fad diets like Atkins, consumers often focus on the total carb figure, ignoring the fiber and sugar values. Fiber reduces the risk of heart disease and promotes healthy bowel function. (Health experts like Augustine recommend getting 30 to 35 grams a day.) And since the label doesn’t distinguish between naturally occurring sugars, like those in milk, and added sugar, check the ingredients list for high-fructose corn syrup, sugar, maltose, or sucrose to make sure you’re not loading up on extra sweeteners.

Our Experts

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