



## Figuring Out Food Labels

Eating a well-balanced, nutritious diet has been shown to lower the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, some cancers, and osteoporosis. And the grocery store shelves are full of foods with packaging promising to help do that.

But it's important to take a close look — beyond the promises — at the nutritional values, ingredients, and calorie counts in the food you buy, and to understand how they factor into your family's healthy eating.

Food labels provide this information and allow you to make smart choices to help meet your family's nutritional needs.

### What's on Food Labels?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) require labels on almost all packaged foods. The labels must include nutrition information in readable type. The information usually is on the back or side of packaging under the title "Nutrition Facts." It's also displayed in grocery stores near fresh foods, like fruits, vegetables, and fish.

The nutrition facts label includes:

- a column of information — "% Daily Value" — that shows what portion of the amount of daily recommended nutrients the product provides, based on a 2,000-calorie diet
- information about total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, fiber, and other nutrients
- serving size

Other information on the food label:

- content claims, such as "light" or "low-fat," that must meet strict government definitions so that they are accurate and consistent from one food to another
- health claims, like "While many factors affect heart disease, diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of this disease," which must meet government requirements for approval
- ingredients list

To make healthy, informed food choices, it's important to understand: food label claims; serving sizes; calorie requirements; percent daily values; and important nutrients, vitamins, and minerals.

### Food Label Claims

Manufacturers often make claims about the healthfulness of a food on the front of a package — like "fat-free" or "no cholesterol." The FDA requires food-makers to provide scientific evidence in order to make those claims. Even so, it's a good idea to carefully read the claims and understand what they mean:

- **Reduced fat** means that a product has 25% less fat than the same regular brand.
- **Light** means that the product has 50% less fat than the same regular product.
- **Low-fat** means a product has less than 3 grams of fat per serving.

Even if a food is low in fat, it might not be low in calories or nutritious. Even a low-fat food can be high in sugar. Food companies also may make claims such as "no cholesterol," but that does not necessarily mean the product is low in fat.

### Serving Size and Servings Per Container

At the top of each food label is an amount listing for serving size. These are determined by the food manufacturer, and they're based on the amount that people generally eat. All nutritional value information on the label is based on the serving size. So if a serving size is 2 crackers and you eat 4 crackers — which would be two servings — you need to double all of the nutrition information.

The number of servings per container tells you how many serving sizes are in the whole package. So if one serving is 1 cup, and the entire package has 5 cups, there are five servings per package.

### **Calories**

A calorie is a unit of energy that measures how much energy a food provides to the body. The number of calories that's listed on the food label indicates how many calories are in one serving.

### **Calories From Fat**

The second number, calories from fat, tells the total calories in one serving that come from fat. The label lists fat so that people can monitor the amount of fat in their diets.

Dietitians generally recommend that:

- Adults get no more than 30% of calories from fat. (If you eat a 2,000-calorie diet per day, no more than 600 of these should come from fat.)
- Children 1–3 years old should get 30%–40% of calories from fat.
- Kids and teens 4–18 years old should get 25%–30% of calories from fat.

### **Percent Daily Values**

Percent daily values are listed in the right-hand column in percentages. They tell how much of a nutrient a person will get from eating one serving of that food. If a serving has 18% iron, then that food is providing 18% of your daily iron needs based on 2,000 calories per day.

Percent daily value is most useful for seeing whether a food is high or low in nutrients:

- A food with 5% or less of a nutrient is considered to be low in that nutrient.
- A food with 10%–19% of a nutrient is considered a good source of that nutrient.
- A food with 20% or more of a nutrient is considered high in that nutrient.

The information on food labels is based on an average diet of 2,000 calories per day, but the actual number of calories and nutrients that kids need will vary according to their age, weight, gender, and level of physical activity. (For more guidance, check out the USDA's MyPlate.)

So use food labels as a guide, but don't worry so much about calculating the nutrients down to the exact ounce as long as your kids are healthy. If you have concerns, talk to your doctor.

### **Total Fat**

This number indicates how much fat is in a single serving of food and it's usually measured in grams. Although eating too much fat can lead to obesity and related health problems, our bodies do need some fat every day.

Fats are an important source of energy — they contain twice as much energy per gram as carbohydrate or protein. Fats provide insulation and cushioning for the skin, bones, and internal organs. Fat also carries and helps store certain vitamins (A, D, E, and K).

But because eating too much fat can contribute to health problems, including heart disease, adults and kids over 4 years old should have about 30% of their daily calorie intake come from fat. Kids 1 to 3 years old should get 30%–40% of calories from fat.

### **Saturated Fat and Trans Fat**

The amount of saturated fat appears beneath total fat. The FDA also requires food-makers to list trans fats separately on the label.

Saturated fats and trans fats are often called "bad fats" because they raise cholesterol and increase a person's risk for developing heart disease. Both saturated and trans fats are solid at room temperature (picture them clogging up arteries!).

Saturated fat usually comes from animal products like butter, cheese, whole milk, ice cream, and meats. Trans fats are naturally found in these foods, too. But they're also in vegetable oils that have been specially treated, or hydrogenated, to be solid at room temperature — the fats in stick margarine and shortening, for example. Some cookies, crackers, fried foods, snack foods, and processed foods also contain trans fats.

Saturated fats should account for less than 10% of the calories that kids eat each day, and the amount of trans fat that they consume should be as low as possible (less than 1% of total calories).

### **Unsaturated Fat**

Unsaturated fats are also listed under total fat. These are fats that are liquid at room temperature. Foods high in unsaturated fat are vegetable oils, nuts, and fish. Unsaturated fats are often called "good fats" because they don't raise cholesterol levels as saturated fats do. Most fats should come from sources of unsaturated fats.

## **Cholesterol**

Cholesterol, usually measured in milligrams, is listed under the fat information. Cholesterol is important in producing vitamin D, some hormones, and in building many other important substances in the body.

Cholesterol can become a problem if the amount in the blood is too high, though, which can increase the risk of developing atherosclerosis, a blockage and hardening of arteries that can lead to a heart attack or stroke.

Most of the cholesterol a person needs is manufactured by the liver. However, dietary sources such as meat and poultry, eggs, and whole-milk dairy products also contribute to cholesterol level.

## **Sodium**

Sodium, a component of salt, is listed on the Nutrition Facts label in milligrams. Small amounts of sodium are necessary for keeping proper body fluid balance, but too much can contribute to high blood pressure. Almost all foods naturally contain small amounts of sodium but many processed foods contain greater amounts.

## **Total Carbohydrate**

This number, listed in grams, combines several types of carbohydrates: dietary fibers, sugars, and other carbohydrates. Carbs are the most abundant source of calories. Up to 60% of a child's total calories should come from carbohydrates. The best sources are fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

## **Dietary Fiber**

Listed under total carbohydrate, dietary fiber itself has no calories and is a necessary part of a healthy diet. High-fiber diets promote bowel regularity, may help reduce the risk of colon cancer, and can help reduce cholesterol levels.

## **Sugars**

Also listed under total carbohydrate on food labels, sugars are found in most foods. Fruits naturally contain simple sugars but also contain fiber, water, and vitamins, which make them a healthy choice.

Snack foods, candy, and soda, on the other hand, often have large amounts of added sugars. Although carbohydrates have just 4 calories per gram, the high sugar content in soft drinks and snack foods means the calories can add up quickly, and these "empty calories" usually contain few other nutrients.

## **Protein**

This listing tells you how much protein is in a single serving of a food and is usually measured in grams. Most of the body — including muscles, skin, and the immune system — is made up of protein. If the body doesn't get enough fat and carbohydrates, it can use protein for energy.

Foods high in protein include eggs, meat, poultry, fish, milk, cheese, yogurt, nuts, soybeans, and dried beans. Anywhere from 10%-20% of the calories that kids consume each day should come from protein.

## **Vitamin A and Vitamin C**

Vitamins A and C are two important vitamins, which is why they're required to be listed on the Nutrition Facts label. The amount of each vitamin per serving is measured in percent daily values — so eating a food with a percent daily value of 80% vitamin C gives you 80% of the recommended daily value for vitamin C based on a 2,000-calorie diet.

Vitamin A, which usually appears first on a food label's list of vitamins and minerals, is important for good eyesight and helps maintain healthy skin. It's found in orange vegetables, such as carrots and squash, and in dark green, leafy vegetables.

Vitamin C helps the body build and maintain connective tissues, heal wounds, and fight infections. It's found in citrus fruits and other fruits, and some vegetables.

Food companies might also list the amounts of other vitamins.

## **Calcium and Iron**

The percentages of these two important minerals are required on labels and measured in percent daily values. Food companies can also list the amount of other minerals.

Calcium has a lot of uses in the body, but is best known for its role in building healthy bones and teeth. Milk and

other dairy products are excellent calcium sources. Kids between 1 and 3 years old need 700 milligrams of calcium per day, while 4- to 8-year-olds need 1,000 milligrams.

The calcium requirement for kids and teens 9 to 18 years old jumps to 1,300 milligrams per day — the equivalent of 4 cups (about 1 liter) of milk. It's easy to see why most teens in the United States don't get enough calcium. But calcium also is in other foods, such as fortified orange juice, yogurt, cheese, and green leafy vegetables.

Iron helps the body make new, healthy red blood cells. Red blood cells carry oxygen, so it's important to get enough iron. Teenage girls and women need extra iron to compensate for that lost in the blood during menstruation. Meat is the best source of iron, but it's also found in iron-fortified cereals, tofu, dried beans, and dark green, leafy vegetables.

### **Label Listings for Avoiding Allergies**

Food labels must also include the ingredients that are in the product, listed according to how much of the ingredient the food contains.

Reading the ingredient list is especially important if someone in your family has a food allergy. Since 2006, food-makers have been required to clearly state on food labels (after or next to the list of ingredients) whether the products contain common food allergens.

In some cases, it's easy to identify what's safe to eat by checking the listed ingredients on a label. However, some ingredients that could trigger an allergic reaction may be listed under an unfamiliar name. A dietitian can provide suggestions on what foods to avoid and hidden ingredients to beware of.

Use your food label smarts to create a healthy, well-balanced diet. It might seem complicated at first, but it can help you make good choices when shopping for your family.

**Reviewed by:** Steven Dowshen, MD

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Note: All information on KidsHealth® is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

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# Figuring Out Food Labels

Post Test – March 2020

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1. Food labels provide information and allow you to make smart choices to help meet your family's \_\_\_\_\_ needs.
2. Content claims such as "light" or "low fat" must meet strict government \_\_\_\_\_ so that they are accurate and consistent from one food to another.
3. Reduced fat means that a product has 50% less fat than the same regular brand.  
True or False?
4. All nutritional value information on the label is based on the \_\_\_\_\_.
5. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a unit of energy that measures how much energy a food provides to the body.
6. Dietitians generally recommend that children 1-3 years old should get 30%-40% of calories from fat.  
True or False?
7. \_\_\_\_\_ fats and \_\_\_\_\_ fats are often called "bad fats" because they raise cholesterol and increase a person's risk for developing heart disease.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ diets promote bowel regularity, may help reduce the risk of colon cancer and can help reduce cholesterol levels.
9. Anywhere from 10%-20% of the calories that kids consume each day should come from \_\_\_\_\_.
10. Since 2006, food-makers have been required to clearly state on food labels whether the products contain common food \_\_\_\_\_.

February 2020 Quiz Answers. 1.Crafty 2.Independence 3.False 4.Power Struggle  
5.Overestimate 6.Nutritious 7.True 8.Structured 9.Weight 10.Junk Foods



Southwest Human Development Services  
P.O. Box 28487 • Austin, Texas 78755-8487  
(512) 467-7916 • Toll Free (800) 369-9082  
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