

# Food Labels

Since 1994 food manufacturers have been required by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to include food labels (or Nutrition Facts labels) on product packaging so that consumers have accurate nutritional information about the food they purchase. But food labels are more than just a federal requirement – once you understand the information they provide, you can use food labels as a guide to planning healthier meals and snacks.

Food labels are required on almost all foods, except those that don't provide many nutrients such as coffee, alcohol and spices. Although some restaurants provide information about the food they serve, they aren't required to have labels. The FDA recommends that sellers provide nutritional information on produce, meat, poultry and seafood, but it's strictly voluntary.

Sample label for Macaroni & Cheese

<b>Nutrition Facts</b>	
Serving Size 1 cup (228g)	
Serving Per Container 2	
Amount Per Serving	
<b>Calories</b> 250	Calories from Fat 110
% Daily Value*	
<b>Total Fat</b> 12g	<b>18%</b>
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
<b>Cholesterol</b> 30mg	<b>10%</b>
<b>Sodium</b> 470mg	<b>20%</b>
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b> 31g	<b>10%</b>
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 5g	
<b>Protein</b> 5g	
Vitamin A	4%
Vitamin C	2%
Calcium	20%
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
Sat 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

## Understanding Serving Sizes

To understand more about food labels and serving sizes, look to the sample food label on the right. At the top of the label under Nutrition Facts, you'll see the serving size and the number of servings in the package. The rest of the nutrition information in the label is based on one serving. In this example, one cup is designated as one serving, and the package contains two servings.

That means that if you eat the whole box of macaroni and cheese, you're eating two servings, not one, so you'll have to multiply the number of calories, fat grams and other nutrients by two to get accurate nutrition information.

## Calories, Calories From Fat and Percent Daily Values

This part of the label provides the calories per serving and the calories that come from fat. If you need to know the total number of calories you eat every day or the number of calories that come from fat, this section provides that information. In this example there are 250 calories in a one-cup serving of macaroni and cheese. But almost half the calories, 110, come from fat. Remember that this part of the label doesn't tell you whether you are eating saturated or unsaturated fat.

On the right side of the label, you'll see a column that lists percentages that are highlighted in purple. These percentages refer to the percent daily values (%DV).

Percent daily values tell you how much of something, whether it's fat, sugar or vitamin A, one serving will give you compared to how much you need for the entire day. It will help you gauge the percentage of a nutrient requirement met by one serving of the product. One way to use this section of the label is when you comparison shop. For example, if you're concerned with sodium, you can look at two foods and choose the food with the lower % DV. Are you trying to eat a low-fat diet? Look for foods that have a lower percent daily value of fat.

Let's take the example of macaroni and cheese. Let's say one brand provides 18% DV of fat and another brand provides 25% DV of fat. A better nutritional choice may be the brand that provides 18% because you're using less of your "fat budget" for the day. But be careful to read the list of ingredients to make sure there isn't increased sodium or sugar in the macaroni and cheese with 18% DV.

The % DV is based on how much or how little of the key nutrients you should eat whether you eat 2,000 or 2,500 calories a day. So if you eat a 2,000-calorie diet, you should eat less than 65 grams of fat in all the foods you eat for the day. If you're eating 12 grams of fat in your one serving of macaroni and cheese (remember that's one cup), you can calculate how much fat you have left for the day. You can use the bottom part of the food label in white to compare what you are eating to the % DV you're allowed for that nutrient, whether it's fat, sodium or fiber. If you need more or less than 2,000 or 2,500 calories, you'll need to adjust this accordingly.

### **Fat, Sugar, Sodium and Carbohydrate**

The sections on the label highlighted in yellow show the name of a nutrient and the amount of that nutrient provided by one serving of food. In our example, one serving of macaroni and cheese contains 12 grams of fat, 30 milligrams of cholesterol, 470 milligrams of sodium and 31 grams of carbohydrate. You may need to know this information, especially if you have high blood pressure, diabetes or are eating a diet that restricts certain nutrients such as sodium or carbohydrates.

Food labels also include information about how much sugar and protein is in the food. If you are following a low-sugar diet or you're monitoring your protein intake, it's easy to spot how much of those nutrients are contained in one serving.

### **Vitamins, Minerals and Other Information**

The light purple part of the label lists nutrients, vitamins and minerals in the food and their percent daily values. Try to average 100% DV every day for vitamins A and C, calcium, iron and fiber. Do the opposite with fat, saturated fat, sodium and cholesterol. Try to eat less than 100% DV of these.

### **What's In The Footnote?**

Below the asterisk sign (\*) at the bottom of the label, you'll see the key nutrients listed and how much you should eat, depending on your calorie intake.

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## Common Mistakes to Avoid When Reading a Food Label

Until you become accustomed to reading food labels, it's easy to become confused. Avoid these common mistakes when reading labels:

- A label may say that the food is reduced fat or reduced sodium. That means that the amount of fat or sodium has been reduced by 25% from the original product. It doesn't mean, however, that the food is low in fat or sodium. For example, if a can of soup originally had 1,000 milligrams of sodium, the reduced sodium product would still be a high-sodium food.
- Don't confuse the % DV for fat with the percentage of calories from fat. If the % DV is 15% that doesn't mean that 15% of the calories comes from fat. Rather, it means that you're using up 15% of all the fat you need for a day with one serving (based on a meal plan of 2,000 calories per day).
- Don't make the mistake of assuming that the amount of sugar on a label means that the sugar has been added. For example, milk naturally has sugar, which is called lactose. But that doesn't mean you should stop drinking milk because milk is full of other important nutrients including calcium. What you can do is look at the list of ingredients. If you see the words high-fructose corn syrup or sugar high on the list of ingredients, it probably means refined sugar has been added to the product.
- A common mistake people make, especially with packages dispensed from vending machines, is to assume that a small item contains one serving just because the package is small. If you eat a bag of pretzels from a vending machine, for example, you may find that it contains 2.5 servings. So you need to multiply the numbers by 2.5 to figure out how many calories and the amount of sodium and other nutrients you are eating.

## Reading Label Lingo

In addition to requiring that packaged foods contain a Nutrition Facts label, the FDA also regulates the use of phrases and terms used on the product packaging. Here's a list of common phrases you may see on your food packaging - and what they actually mean.

- No fat or fat free: Contains less than 1/2 gram of fat per serving
- Lower or reduced fat: Contains at least 25 percent less per serving than the reference food. (An example might be reduced fat cream cheese, which would have at least 25 percent less fat than original cream cheese.)
- Low fat: Contains less than 3 grams of fat per serving
- Lite: Contains 1/3 the calories or 1/2 the fat per serving of the original version or a similar product
- No calories or calorie free: Contains less than 5 calories per serving
- Low calories: Contains 1/3 the calories of the original version or a similar product
- Sugar free: Contains less than 1/2 gram of sugar per serving
- Reduced sugar: at least 25% less sugar per serving than the reference food
- No preservatives: Contains no preservatives (chemical or natural)
- No preservatives added: Contains no added chemicals to preserve the product. Some of these products may contain natural preservatives
- Low sodium: contains less than 140 mgs of sodium per serving
- No salt or salt free: Contains less than 5 mgs of sodium per serving

- High fiber: 5 g or more per serving (Foods making high-fiber claims must meet the definition for low fat, or the level of total fat must appear next to the high-fiber claim)
- Good source of fiber: 2.5 g to 4.9 g. per serving
- More or added fiber: Contains at least 2.5 g more per serving than the reference food

With some Nutrition-Facts practice, you'll be able to quickly scan a food label and learn how the food fits into your nutrition and diet for the day.