

FOOD LABELS: HOW DO WE INTERPRET THE NUTRITION FACTS? PART I

In much the same way that a Table of Contents explains what is inside a book, so too does the Nutrition Facts Food Label tell what the food we eat contains. It is important therefore that consumers know how to use this information. The Nutrition Facts Panel of the Food Label is printed on the outside of packaged food and can usually be located quite easily. With today's food labels, consumers are able to:

- Obtain nutrition information about almost every food item on a grocery shelf.
- Compare the nutrient values in similar products.
- Quickly find information they need to make healthy food choices.

- See how a food fits into an overall daily diet.
- Determine the amount per serving of nutrients especially those of major health concern.

The chart below shows a typical example of a Nutrition Facts Panel of the Food Label. The panel is divided into four main sections as indicated by heavy solid horizontal lines. Section one gives facts on the serving size; section two gives information on calories and calories from fat. Section three gives details of the nutrients that are most important to the health of most consumers, most of whom worry about getting too much of certain items (fat for example) rather than too few vitamins and minerals as in the past. Section four gives an indi-

cation of reference values to help consumers learn good diet basics. They can be adjusted depending on a person's caloric needs.

There are several forms of the same label printed for different products depending on the size and shape of the container but the basic mandatory information are the same. Some product manufacturers give additional information on the labels if they feel it could substantiate a health claim. Health claims will be addressed in Part II of the Series on Food Labels.



NUTRITION FACTS PANEL

Nutrition facts			
Serving size	½ cup (114g)		
Serving per container	4		
Amount per serving			
Calories 260	Calories from fat 120		
			% Daily value
Total fat	13 g	20%	
Saturated fat	5 g	25%	
Cholesterol	30 mg	10%	
Sodium	660 mg	28%	
Total carbohydrate	31 g	11%	
Sugars	5 g		
Dietary fibre	0 g	0%	
Protein	5 g		
Vitamin A 4%	Vitamin C 2%	Calcium 15%	Iron 4%
Percents (%) of a Daily value are based on a 2,000 Calorie diet			
Your Daily values may vary higher or lower depending on your Calorie needs:			
Nutrient		2,000 Calories	2,500 Calories
Total fat	Less than	65 g	80 g
Saturated fat	Less than	20 g	25 g
Cholesterol	Less than	300 mg	300 mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400 mg	2,400 mg
Total carbohydrate		300 g	375 g
Fibre		25 g	30 g
1 g fat – 9 calories			
1 g carbohydrates – 4 calories			
1 g protein – 4 calories			

The Serving Size

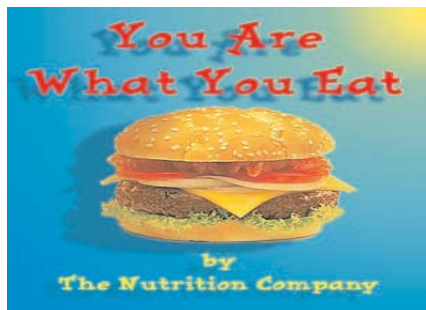
The first place to start when reading the Nutrition Facts Panel on the label is the

serving size and the number of servings in the package. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the United States has established specific

serving sizes that reflect amounts that people customarily consume or household measures and also requires that all labels for a given

product use the same serving size e.g. the serving size for all ice creams is ½ cup and for all beverages, 8 fluid ounces. This facilitates comparison shopping. It is important that consumers consider how the serving size compares with the actual quantity eaten. For example, if the serving size is three cookies and you ate six, then you need to double the Calorie values.

Calories



The "Calories" and "Calories from Fat" can be seen on the second section of the panel between the two bold lines. Calories or short for kilocalories are a measure of the amount of energy that will be obtained from a single serving. This is usually denoted by either a big "C" or a small "c". In this context they both refer to the kilocalorie. It is important to pay close attention to this value because many people consume more calories than they need without meeting recommended intakes for a number of nutrients. This new mandatory component of the panel helps consumers to meet dietary guidelines recommending no more than 25-30% of calories from fat. This could help with weight management.

The Nutrients and Nutrition-Related Substances

On the third section of the Nutrition Facts Panel there is a mandatory listing of nutrients, cholesterol and fibre:

- Total Fat
- Cholesterol
- Sodium
- Total Carbohydrate
- Protein
- Any other nutrient for which a nutrition claim is made.

Excessive consumption of those nutrients is strongly linked to an increased risk of certain chronic nutrition-related non-communicable diseases like heart disease, some cancers and high blood pressure.

The nutrients listed just below that panel are needed only in minute amounts but are extremely important for maintaining good nutritional status. The Vitamins and Minerals are listed here. These nutrients have been shown to reduce the risk of developing some diseases and conditions: a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetable and low in fat may reduce the risk of heart disease and certain cancers.

Understand the Percent Daily Values

Labels present nutrient information in two ways – in quantities (such as grams) and as percentages of Daily Values. The "% Daily Value" compares key nutrients in a serving of food to the amount a person should get

each day. Daily Values are based on a 2000kcal diet and help consumers see easily whether a food contributes large or small amounts of a nutrient. All nutrients must be declared as percentages of the daily value. What is important to note is that Percent Daily Value does not change from product to product because it shows recommended dietary advice for all persons: it is not about a specific food product.

In the section of the panel that looks at % Daily Values, two



types of foods are identified – those that must be eaten in controlled quantities or they may contribute to disease and those whose consumption is associated with health benefits. If "less than" is next to the nutrient, it means the amount quoted is 100% of the Daily Value for that nutrient and hence the dietary goal should be to eat "less than" the amount quoted. For example, if the Daily Value for saturated fat is 20g, this amount is 100% of the Daily Value for this nutrient. Hence, the dietary goal should be to eat "less than" 20g or 100% Daily Value for the day. Where

a food contains, for example, 25g of fibre (100% Daily Value) it is recommended that "at least" this amount of dietary fibre should be consumed per day.

It is important to note that Trans fat and sugars do not list a Percent Daily Value on the Nutrition Facts Label. To limit nutrients that

have no % Daily Value, compare the labels of similar products and choose the food with the lowest amount.

Remember, the food label will **NOT** tell you what foods to eat – that is your decision. However, it will help you find foods with the kinds of nutritional benefits you want. ♦



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