



How to Read a Nutrition Label

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You know by now that you can't trust most of the marketing claims splashed across product labels, and that it's essential to check the Nutrition Facts to see what you're really getting.

But the Nutrition Facts label can be a bit overwhelming if you don't know just what you're looking for. Is 40 milligrams of sodium in a can of Coke Zero a lot or a little? Is 32 grams of sugar high or low for a carton of fat-free Yoplait?

It's nearly impossible to specify exactly what to look for on every label of every product, since the stats that matter will vary with the type of food. The key nutrients to consider when comparing cheeses, for example, are different than comparing crackers or bread.

So here's a rundown of all that's on a nutrition facts label, including reference ranges and upper limits, as well as what information doesn't really matter much at all.

Serving size

This may seem obvious, but you can't always tell by the size of the packaging - even items that appear to be a 'single' serving can often have two or more servings in a container. And when it comes to foods like cereal, chips, or crackers, how much are you really eating? Oh, and that half-cup serving of ice cream, by the way, is about what fits into a single cupcake wrapper.

Calories

Depending on the person, an appropriate range may be 100 to 300-plus calories for a snack, and 300 to 500 calories or more for a meal.

Total fat

I almost never look at total fat on a nutrition label - it's far less important than the type of fat that the product contains.

Trans fat

Trans fats have a doubly negative effect: not only do they appear to increase our 'bad' LDL cholesterol, they can also reduce our 'good' HDL cholesterol, so try to keep trans fat as close to zero as possible.

Saturated fat

Research shows that different types of saturated fat may not impact cholesterol levels in the same way. One of the types of saturated fat in chocolate, for example, appears to have a neutral affect on cholesterol. Still, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines recommend that we get less than 10% of our calories from saturated fat, and less than 7% to further reduce the risk of heart disease. The American Heart Association (AHA) says to limit saturated fat to less than 7% of total daily calories. For an 1800-calorie diet, this 7 to 10 percent upper limit translates to 14 to 20 grams of saturated fat.

Cholesterol

Though research shows that cholesterol from food doesn't appear to raise our blood levels of LDL cholesterol as we once thought, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines and the AHA guidelines both recommend that we limit our cholesterol intake to not more than 300 milligrams (mg) daily. One large egg has about 186 mg of cholesterol, and a mere 1.5 grams of saturated fat.

Sodium

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines and the AHA recommend an upper limit of 1500 mg for most of the population (though people who lose large amounts of sweat through exercise or work in a hot, humid environment may need more). So that 40 mg in your can of Coke Zero – not such a big deal. But the 800-plus mg that you can find in a single frozen dinner can be much more significant.

Total carbohydrates

To give you a frame of reference, 15 grams of carbohydrate is about what you get in a regular slice of bread. So that Lean Cuisine with 62 grams of carbohydrate gives you the equivalent of four slices of (often white) bread.

Fiber

Fiber is mostly found in foods like whole grains, beans, fruits, and vegetables as well as products that are made with these ingredients, but you won't typically find it in foods like meats, milk, cheeses, and oils. Look for at least 3 to 5 grams of fiber per serving, scanning the ingredient list as well to ensure that the majority of the fiber is from naturally-occurring fiber, not just isolated fibers like inulin or chicory root.

Sugar

The AHA recommends that we limit added sugars to 25 grams daily for women and 37 grams daily for men. Unfortunately, Nutrition Facts labels don't differentiate between added sugars and naturally-occurring sugars (like those from fruit or milk), so it's up to us to look at the ingredient list to see where they're coming from.

Protein

Protein needs vary by person, though I typically recommend that my clients aim for 0.5 to one gram of protein per pound of ideal body weight. Protein matters more on the Nutrition Facts labels of foods like meats, seafood, and dairy, and is less important for foods like fruits, veggies, and many grains (for these foods, keep the focus on fiber, with minimal added sugar).

Calcium

The recommendations for calcium are in milligrams (about 1,000 to 1,200 for the majority of adults), yet Nutrition Facts labels list calcium content as a percentage of daily value. This 'daily value' is based on 1,000 mg of calcium, so at least the math is easy: a carton of Greek yogurt that provides 20% of the daily value for calcium means that it has 200 mg of calcium; a cup of milk with 30% of the daily value for calcium has 300 mg of calcium.

And finally, don't get bogged down with less useful pieces of information like calories from fat or Percent Daily Value for fat, carbohydrate, etc. For the most part, I'd prefer that these weren't even included on labels; I find that they can confuse more people than they help.