

A Guide to Healthy Eating

Reading Food Labels

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Reading food labels is important because they provide us with information that can help us make healthy food choices. There are a lot of numbers and claims on food labels and they can look quite confusing but, in this article, we will try to explain some of this information.

Except of the name of the food and the total weight of the food, we can also see the following information on a food label:

Ingredients

This is a list of ingredients in the food, listed in descending order by weight. The first ingredient on the list is of the highest amount, followed by the second, third and so on. This means that if the first ingredient in the list is sugar then this is a food that is high in added sugar and we may need to avoid.

Allergens

The ingredients list may include information important for allergy sufferers. In this list you may identify allergenic food ingredients such as milk and nuts. Sometimes, statements such as “contains peanuts” or “contains milk” inform consumers of the presence of allergenic ingredients.

The Nutrition Information Panel

The Nutrition Information Panel includes information about the nutrients found in one serving or in 100g or 100ml of food. This includes the energy, protein, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, carbohydrate, sugar, dietary fibre and sodium content. This information can help us assess the nutritive value of a given food.

Serving size

The “Per serving” column lists the nutrient content in one serving of food. The calorie and nutrient information on the label apply to one serving. The label also indicates how many total servings are in the container. If you eat more than one serving, you get more calories and nutrients.

The “Per 100g” column helps consumers to compare the nutrient content of similar products. For example, you can compare a wholegrain bread that contains lower fat and lower saturated fat and higher dietary fiber than a white bread by looking the nutrition content per 100g.

Calories

Energy in serving of food is usually displayed in calories in a food label. To achieve or maintain a healthy body weight, we need to balance the number of calories we eat and drink with the number of calories our body spends during physical activity. As a general guide for nutrition advice a 2,000 calories intake per a day is used. Our calorie needs depend on our age, sex, height, weight, and physical activity level.

Total fat, saturated fat, and trans-fat

The recommendation for total fat for someone who needs to eat 2,000 calories per day is 50 g to 75 g per day. Saturated fat and trans-fat are not heart healthy. Therefore, a person who needs to eat 2,000 calories per day should eat no more than 11 g to 15 g of saturated fat in one day. For a product to be claimed as fat free, it must contain less than 3g fat per 100g.

Carbohydrates and Sugars:

Carbohydrates come in two forms – sugars and starches. Sugars can be naturally present in many nutritious foods and beverages, such as sugar in milk and fruit. However, sugars can be present in a product as added sugars. Added Sugars include sugars that are added during the processing of foods. Our sugar consumption should be no more than 10 percent of our daily energy intake. In one day, women should consume less than 25 g of added sugars and men should consume less than 37.5 g.

Sometimes products claim that they have “no added sugar” or they are “Unsweetened”. No added sugar or unsweetened may not necessarily mean no sugar. It means that no extra sugar was added during the manufacturing process. The product may already be naturally high in sugars, such as fruit juices and canned fruits.

Sugar is called by many names, therefore keep an eye out for these terms—they are all added sugar:

Brown sugar, Corn sweetener, Corn syrup, Sugar molecules ending in “-ose” (dextrose, fructose, glucose, lactose, maltose, sucrose), High-fructose corn syrup, Fruit juice concentrates, Honey, Invert sugar, Malt sugar, Molasses, Raw sugar, Sugar, Syrup.

A product to claim that is fat free it must contain the following amounts:
less 0.5g sugars per 100g or 100ml

Dietary fiber:

We should aim to get 25 g to 30 g dietary fiber each day. Therefore, we every day we should choose several foods that have at least 5 g fiber per serving. A product to claim that is high in dietary fibre in needs to contain the following amounts: More than 6g per 100g

Sodium:

Sodium represents the amount of salt in the food. We should look for foods that are low in sodium. Each day we should eat less than 2000 milligrams sodium (or the limit set for you by your doctor). The following are salt and ingredients containing Sodium: Salt, Rock salt, Sea salt, Vegetable salts, Chicken powder, Soya sauce, Oyster Sauce, Monosodium, Glutamate, Sodium inosinate, Sodium guanylate, Baking powder, Baking soda, Sodium nitrate.

Other important Information:

The expiry date indicates the date after which food should not be sold. It can be called “Expiry date”, “Use by”, “Sell by” or “Best before” date. We should consume food products before the expiry date for best nutrition quality, flavor and texture and for avoiding food poisoning and put your health at risk

Healthier Choice Symbol

The Healthier Choice Symbol on packaged food products indicates that they are healthier options and are an easy way for us to tell which food products are better for our diet. The healthier Choice Symbol can be seen on products when they are lower in fat, saturated fat, sugar and sodium. It can also be used products that are higher in whole-grains, dietary fibre and calcium compared to similar products within the same food category.

Summary

In summary we can all make healthier choices when we read food labels and make comparisons between products. To do that we need to check the ingredient list, nutrients per serving, nutrients per 100g and the presence of the Healthier Choice Symbol.

References:

- Reading Labels the Complete Guide. HPB: https://www.healthhub.sg/sites/assets/Assets/PDFs/HPB/Food/FINAL%20Food_label_brochure_English-pr-E.pdf
- A handbook on nutrition labelling. HPB: [https://www.hpb.gov.sg/docs/default-source/newsroom/a-handbook-on-nutrition-labelling-\(singapore\)-_june-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=b232e5ec_2](https://www.hpb.gov.sg/docs/default-source/newsroom/a-handbook-on-nutrition-labelling-(singapore)-_june-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=b232e5ec_2)
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