

Label Reading Like a Pro

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Gain confidence when shopping & eating by knowing how to read a food label and what to look for.

Food labels give you information about the calories, number of servings, and nutrient content of packaged foods. Reading the labels can help you make healthy choices when you shop.

When picking up a packaged food item, there are two things I want you to look for:

1) Ingredients List

2) Nutrition Facts Label

INGREDIENT LIST:

Product ingredients are listed by quantity, from highest to lowest amount. This means that the first listed ingredient is what the manufacturer used the most of.

Begin by noticing the first three ingredients, because they are the largest part of what you're eating. Are these ingredients whole, real food? Are any of the first three ingredients a type of sugar or sweetener?

TIP: *even if the ingredient is a real-food item, such as dates, learn to recognize which foods are naturally high in sugar and used as sweeteners.*

If the first three ingredients include refined grains, sweeteners, or inflammatory oils, you're better off without it! Try to choose items that have whole foods listed as the first three ingredients.

Also, note the number of ingredients. While there are always exceptions to this rule, a general guideline to follow is the longer the ingredient list, the more processed the food is. I generally advise staying away from products with a long list of ingredients you have trouble pronouncing! Be skeptical of foods with long lists of ingredients.

NUTRITION FACTS LABEL:

First things first, always check the serving size. All the information on the label is based on the serving size and many packages contain more than 1 serving.

For example, the serving size for pasta is most often 2 ounces (56 grams) uncooked, or 1 cup cooked. If you eat 2 cups at a meal, you are eating 2 servings. That is 2 times the amount of the calories, fats, and other items listed on the label.

As you continue reading the Nutrition Facts Label you will notice calories, total fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates and protein.

Some of these categories have sub-categories: fat includes saturated, trans, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats; carbohydrates include dietary fiber and sugar.

When the Nutrition Facts Label says a food contains “0 g” of trans fat, but includes “partially hydrogenated oil” in the ingredient list, it means the food contains trans fats, but less than 0.5 grams per serving. Trans fats are not recommended in any amount so keep an eye on the ingredients list for the word “hydrogenated” and steer clear of those foods!

The total carbohydrates are listed in bold letters to stand out and are measured in grams (g). Sugar, starch, and dietary fiber make up the total carbs on the label. Sugar and fiber are listed separately. All of these carbs impact your blood sugar.

TIP: *To minimize blood sugar impact, choose foods that have a lower net carbohydrate total. Net carbs can be determined by subtracting fiber from the total carbohydrates. For example, if there are 14g of total carbohydrates and 5g of dietary fiber, there are 9 grams of net carbs.*

The percentage listed next to each item on the label is based on eating 2,000 calories a day. Your goals will be different if you eat more or fewer calories a day and macronutrient ratios are not a one-size fits all approach. In general, I recommend ignoring those percentages.

TIP: *For processed foods, my rule is that a food should have no more than 5 grams of added sugar per 100-calorie serving. This is added sugar, so it won't apply to whole fruit.*

Misleading Claims on the Front of the Label

One of the best tips may be to completely ignore the labels on the front of packaging. Front labels try to lure you into purchasing products by making health claims. Manufacturers want to make you believe that their product is healthier than other, similar options. Many of these claims are misleading and influence us to make purchases without consulting the ingredients list or nutrition fact label.

Here are some of the most common label claims, and their true definition:

Light: Light products are processed to reduce either calories or fat, and some products are simply watered down. Check carefully to see if anything has been added instead, like sugar. This is common in low-fat or non-fat products.

Multigrain: This sounds very healthy, but basically just means that there is more than one type of grain in the product. These are most likely refined grains, unless the product is marked as whole grain.

Natural: This does not necessarily mean that the product resembles anything natural. It simply means that at some point the manufacturer had a natural source (for example, apples or rice) to work with.

Organic: This label says very little about whether the product is healthy or not. For example, organic sugar is still sugar. Only certified organically grown products can be guaranteed to be organic.

No added sugar: Some products are naturally high in sugar. The fact that they don't have added sugar doesn't mean they're healthy. Unhealthy sugar substitutes may also have been added.

Low-calorie: Low-calorie products have to contain 1/3 fewer calories than *the same brand's* original product. However, one brand's low-calorie version may contain similar calories as the original of another product.

Low-fat: This label almost always means that the fat has been reduced at the cost of adding more sugar. Be very careful and read the ingredients listed on the back.

Low-carb: Processed foods that are labeled low-carb are usually just processed junk foods, similar to processed low-fat junk foods. Read ingredient lists carefully.

Made with whole grain: There is probably very little whole grain in the product. Check the ingredients list and see where the whole grain is placed. If it is not in the first 3 ingredients, then the amount is negligible.

Fortified or enriched: This basically means that some nutrients have been added to the product. For example, vitamin D is often added to milk.

Gluten-free: Gluten-free does not equal healthy. It simply means that the product doesn't contain wheat, spelt, rye or barley. Many foods are gluten-free, but can be highly processed and loaded with unhealthy fats and sugar.

Fruit-flavored: Many processed foods have a name that refers to a natural flavor, such as strawberry yogurt. However, there may not be any fruit in the product, only chemicals designed to taste like fruit.

Zero trans-fat: "Zero trans-fat" actually means "less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving." So, if serving sizes are misleadingly small, the product can actually contain a lot of trans fat.

All of this being said, there are many truly healthy foods out there that actually are organic, whole grain, natural, etc. However, just having these labels does not guarantee that the product is healthy.

Always Choose Whole Foods Whenever Possible

The best way to avoid being misled by labels is to avoid processed foods altogether. Try to focus the majority of your diet on unprocessed, real food. However, when you decide to buy packaged foods, it is necessary to sort out the junk from the higher quality products.

Keep in mind that whole food doesn't need an ingredients list, because the whole food IS the ingredient.

Let's Talk More About Sugar

Above you read about my recommendation for added sugar per serving, but how much sugar should we be consuming per day?

The American Heart Association recommends most American women eat to no more than 100 calories per day of sugar (six teaspoons or 20 grams) and no more than 150 calories per day for men (or about nine teaspoons or 36 grams).

To put that into perspective, one teaspoon is equal to four grams of sugar. An eight-ounce glass of orange juice has 5.5 teaspoons of sugar. That's equal to over 20 grams. This is why you want to eat your fruit, not drink it.

Sneaky Sugar

Sugar goes by numerous names, many of which you may not recognize. Food manufacturers use this to their advantage. They purposely add many different kinds of sugar to their products so they can hide the actual amount.

You will remember that product ingredients are listed by quantity, from highest to lowest amount. By adding multiple types of sugar to a product, manufacturers can list a "healthier" ingredient at the top and mention sugar further down. This is deceiving because even though a product may be loaded with sugar, it doesn't necessarily appear as one of the top 3 ingredients.

To avoid accidentally consuming a lot of sugar, it's a good idea to look out for the following names of sugar in ingredient lists:

Types of sugar: beet sugar, brown sugar, buttered sugar, cane sugar, caster sugar, coconut sugar, date sugar, golden sugar, invert sugar, organic raw sugar, evaporated cane juice and confectioner's sugar.

Types of syrup: carob syrup, golden syrup, high fructose corn syrup, honey, agave nectar, malt syrup, maple syrup, oat syrup, rice bran syrup and rice syrup.

Other added sugars: barley malt, molasses, cane juice crystals, lactose, corn sweetener, crystalline fructose, dextran, malt powder, ethyl maltol, fructose, fruit juice concentrate, galactose, glucose, disaccharides, maltodextrin and maltose.

There are many more names for sugar, but these are the most common.

If you see any of these in the top spots on the ingredients lists, or several kinds throughout the list, then you can be sure that the product is high in added sugar.