

What's in a Label?

Food Facts Can Guide Healthy Eating

By: Hillary Wright, MEd, RD, LDN

Are you baffled by food labels? Never quite sure what you're supposed to pay attention to? If so, join the club. The Nutrition Facts label, present on every food package that's big enough to fit it, is there to guide you in making good food choices, but can also be seriously confusing. The following tips will help you sift through all the "stuff" on the Nutrition Facts Label.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 cup (228g) Servings Per Container 2	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 250	Calories from Fat 110
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 12g	18%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 3g	
Cholesterol 30mg	10%
Sodium 470mg	20%
Potassium 700mg	20%
Total Carbohydrate 31g	10%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 5g	
Protein 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

Start here

Check calories

Quick guide to % DV

5% or less is low
20% or more is high

Limit these

Get enough of these

Footnote

Serving Size First

The top half of the label contains the "big information" about what's in the food: serving size, calories and nutrient information. Most of us look at the calories first. But the serving size is actually the first thing you should look at. Why? Everything on that label, from calories on down, reflects the nutrition breakdown of a specific serving size of that food. For example, if that pint-sized container of ice cream says 250 calories per serving (always a 1/2 cup) and you eat the whole container, you ate 250 calories x 4, or 1,000 calories.

If a 20-ounce bottle of soda says 100 calories per serving, but has 2.5 servings in the bottle, that translates into 250 calories of straight sugar if you drink the whole thing.

This general rule can help you evaluate calories on a label:

- 40 calories is low
- 100 calories is moderate
- 400 calories or more is high

If you plan to control your calorie intake, you have to pay close attention to the portion size and the portions per serving.

Figuring Out Fat Calories

Amount Per Serving	
Calories 250	Calories from Fat 110

Under calories per serving is “calories from fat.” Some basic math can help you determine what percentage of calories in this food comes from fat. Experts recommend we limit fat to less than 30 percent of our calories for the day, so the more foods you eat that meet this goal the higher the chance you’ll actually keep your fat intake down. For example, that single-serving size bag of Doritos says there are 140 calories per serving, and 70 calories from fat. Seventy is half of 140, so 50 percent of the calories in the bag come from fat ($70 \div 140 \times 100 = 50$ percent). As an alternative, Baked Doritos have 120 calories per serving with 30 calories from fat, so only 25 percent of the calories come from fat.

Fat and Sodium: Watch These Nutrients!

Total Fat 12g	18%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
<i>Trans</i> Fat 3g	
Cholesterol 30mg	10%
Sodium 470mg	20%

Most people eat too much fat and sodium, which can be bad for your health and weight.

- **Total Fat** tells you the number of grams (g) of fat per serving. Look for “low fat” foods, which means no more than 3 grams of fat per serving.
- **Saturated fat** is bad for your heart and circulation. Look for foods low in saturated fat – no more than 1 gram of saturated fat per serving.
- **Trans fat** is really nasty for your health and can be found in vegetable shortenings, some margarine, fast foods, snack foods, fried foods and other processed foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. Try to avoid it whenever possible.
- **Cholesterol** should be limited to 300 milligrams (mg) a day, and sodium to 2,400 mg a day.

What You Want More Of:

Fiber is great for your digestion, helps control weight and may lower your risk of heart disease and possibly cancer. Aim for 25 grams of fiber per day.

Vitamins and minerals, particularly calcium and iron, are also good for you. The recommended intake for calcium is 1000 mg, so if you replace the % sign at the end of the calcium DV with a zero you'll have the mg per serving (20% calcium DV = 200 mg calcium per serving). The recommended intake for iron is 18 mg.

What's a DV?

Daily Values (DV) are health expert's daily recommended levels of nutrients based on a 2,000-calorie diet. At the very bottom of the label you'll see those numbers listed for fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates and fiber. Above that you'll also see % DV listed for several vitamins and minerals. The % Daily Value listed across from each nutrient on the label tells you what percentage a serving of that food has. It basically tells you if a food is high or low in that nutrient.



Sweet Stuff:

If you are concerned about your intake of sugars, make sure that added sugars are not listed as one of the first few ingredients. Other names for added sugars include: corn syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, fruit juice concentrate, maltose, dextrose, sucrose, honey, and maple syrup.

Bottom Line:

Figure out the portion size and calories per portion first and see how that compares with what you usually eat. Talk to your parents about your family's health history to see what else you should pay attention to. And remember there's room for special treats or "junk food" in your diet as long as you watch your portions and focus on healthy food first!

This article was reviewed by BodiMojo expert Dr. Jessica A. Hoffman.