

Understanding Food Labels

Understanding food labels makes it easier to stay on track with your health and nutrition goals, but the information found on food labels can be confusing. This handout walks you through how to read food labels along with general recommendations.

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
Serving size	2/3 cup (55g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	230
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 8g	10%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 37g	13%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 235mg	6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

The first section of a food label contains information about the amount of food in the package. Labels indicate two things: the number of servings in the entire package, and the average serving size. Serving sizes are shown in two measurements: standard (cups) and metric (grams). In this example, the package contains 8 servings of food. One serving is equal to 2/3 cup, or 55 grams.

Calories:

This section contains information about the number of calories in one serving of this food. Calories are units of energy generated by the food. In this label example, the entire package of food contains 1,840 calories (230 calories multiplied by 8 servings).

Under Total Fat, two sections are listed:

Saturated Fat: For heart health, limit saturated fats to 7-10% of your total daily calories, which is about 12-15 grams of saturated fat per day.

Trans Fat: Because of their negative effect on heart health, avoid trans fats. A food label can list the trans fat content as zero if amount contained in one serving is less than 0.5 grams. To be sure a food is free of trans fat, look at the ingredient list. Trans fats are often listed as “partially-hydrogenated” fats or oils.

Under Total Carbohydrate, three sections are listed:

Dietary Fiber: Fiber is a healthy carbohydrate that isn’t absorbed by the body. Aim to eat at least 25 grams fiber each day for women or 38 grams for men.

Total Sugars: This includes both naturally occurring and added sugars.

Added Sugars: This is the amount of sugar the food manufacturer has added to the food. Limit added sugars to no more than 24 grams per day for women or 35 grams per day for men.

Select vitamins and minerals are also listed. For all nutrients, the Percent Daily Value (DV) is shown on the right side of the label. DVs are an percentage of how much that nutrient contributes to a day's worth of food. All DVs are based on a diet of 2,000 calories per day, however individual calorie needs vary. You may require more or less calories than this amount.

Decoding Ingredient Lists

In the ingredients list of a food label, ingredients are listed in order of largest to smallest amounts. This means that the ingredient that weighs the most is listed first, and the ingredients that weigh the least are listed last.

The ingredient list is particularly important if you have food allergies or sensitivities, as many packaged foods can have hidden sources of common allergens. The eight most common food allergens include eggs, milk, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat (gluten), and soy. These ingredients, and any ingredients derived from them, are required by U.S. law to be listed on all food labels. While they will be listed in the ingredients, they may also appear in a statement immediately after the list (e.g., "Contains wheat, milk, and soy").

Allergen-free packaged foods may still contain trace amounts if they are made on shared equipment. Some manufacturers include advisory statements on their products if they are made in a facility that also processes a major food allergen (e.g., "Packaged in a plant that also processes wheat"). Read the ingredient list thoroughly to prevent an accidental adverse food reaction. The list below provides examples of how these foods might be listed in ingredient lists.

Eggs: albumin (or albumen), egg (dried, powdered, solids, white, yolk), eggnog, lysozyme, mayonnaise, meringue (meringue powder), ovalbumin, surimi

Fish: fish meal, fish oil, fish sauce, surimi, specific species of fish (e.g., bass, cod, flounder, etc.)

Milk: buttermilk solids, casein, caseinate, galactose, hydrolysate, lactate, lactose, milk (dried, malted, powdered, solids, etc.), quark, rennet, whey

Peanuts: arachic oil, beer nuts, cold-pressed, extruded or expelled peanut oil, earth nuts, hydrolyzed peanut protein, mixed nuts, Nu nuts, nut pieces, nutmeat, peanut (butter, flour, paste, sauce, etc.)

Shellfish: barnacle, fish stock, seafood flavoring, surimi, specific type of crustacean shellfish (e.g., crab, crawfish, krill, lobster, prawns, or shrimp)

Soy: bean curd, edamame, hydrolyzed soy protein, kinako, miso, natto, okara, soy (albumin, concentrate, fiber, grits, milk, miso, nuts, sauce, flour, etc.), soybeans, soy lecithin, tamari, tempeh, textured vegetable protein, tofu

Tree Nuts: artificial flavoring, nut butters, nut meal, nutmeat, nut oil, nut pieces, any ingredient made with a specific type of tree nut (e.g., almond, cashew, pecan, walnut, etc.)

Wheat (gluten): dextrin, maltodextrin, modified food starch, textured vegetable protein, specific strains of wheat (e.g., durum wheat, club wheat, spelt, semolina, Einkorn, emmer, kamut, and triticale). Note that “wheat-free” does not mean “gluten-free,” as “wheat-free” products may contain barley, rye, or oats. If you are sensitive to gluten, be sure to avoid products containing barley, rye, and oats.

What About Sugar?

Some packaged foods that are made almost entirely of sugar may not list the first ingredient as sugar, which can be misleading. In some cases, many different types of sugar are included in one product. Each of those types of sugar is listed separately according to its weight, but when added together, they could make up the majority of the food product. This is why it is important to check food labels for the total amount of sugar per serving.

