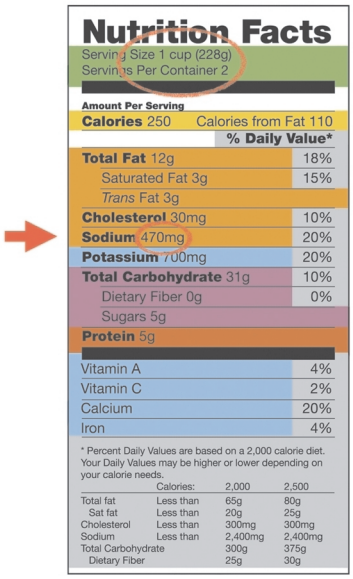
Harvard Pilgrim Health Care

Healthy Eating: How to Read Food Labels



Labels on packaged, canned, and frozen foods can tell you a lot about what is in the food you eat. Learn to use them to choose between foods you should eat more of and those you should limit.

The Nutrition Facts label lists the amount of calories, fat, sodium, carbohydrate, protein, and other nutrients in foods. The list of ingredients on the label tells you everything that is used to make the food. Read both labels to make more healthful choices in how you eat. The list of ingredients lists ingredients from high to low. The higher it is on the list, the more that ingredient is in the food. For example, if the ingredient list has sugar first, it means the food has mostly sugar.

In general, look for foods that are low in sodium, cholesterol, saturated fat, and trans fat. If you need more help in understanding food labels, ask your doctor to refer you to a registered dietitian, an expert in healthy eating.

Use food labels to eat better

When you first check a label, look at the serving size. All of the facts on the label are based on one serving of the food. But the package may have more than one serving. A serving size is often less than a person normally eats.

Check the calories

Try to decide if the amount of calories you get in a serving makes it worth eating. Does it seem to have too many calories for the amount you are getting?

Check the % Daily Value, or % DV

The % DV helps you know how nutritious a food is. It is based on how much of a certain nutrient you should have each day. For example, the DV or daily value for calcium is 1,000 mg. If one serving of a food contains 260 mg of calcium, the label would say the food has a % DV of 26%. So that means one serving of the food gives you 26% of the calcium you need that day.

Learn the difference between fats

Look for foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol. These fats increase your risk of heart disease. Try to eat mostly monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.

Look for sodium (salt)

Many packaged and canned foods have a lot of sodium. Try to eat no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium a day. If you have high blood pressure, heart problems, or kidney disease, you may need to eat less. Check with your doctor. Most of the sodium that people eat comes from processed foods, not from salt they add at the table.

Watch for added sugars

Sugars give you calories but not vitamins and minerals. Choose foods and drinks that are low in added sugars. Sucrose, glucose, corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, and fructose are different words for sugars. If sugar is one of the first ingredients listed, it means sugar is one of the main ingredients in that food.