Learn to Use Nutrition Labels

Nutrition labels are a convenient way to show the nutrition content of a serving size on all packaged foods. This is regulated by the FDA and USDA and labels have certain requirements on what it has to contain. It can be a little confusing at first but with a little knowledge of what the numbers mean and a little practice it can be easy and helpful when trying to pick out healthy foods.

Be Aware of the Servings!

The first and most important thing to understand is the serving size. This varies from product to product and you should keep it in mind when you decide how much you want to eat, or your portion size. It is very easy to be eating more than the serving size without even knowing it.

For example, on the pictured label it shows a serving size of 1 cup with a total of 2 servings in a container. If you decided to eat the whole box as your entire meal you would have to double all of the nutrition on the label. So instead of eating 12 grams of total fat you would now be eating 24 grams.

Calories

The next important piece of information is the calories and calories from fat. This will help you lose, maintain, or gain weight. Calories can be confusing, but they need to be put into context.

In the case of the macaroni and cheese if one cup was to be eaten as a snack then the calories are on the high side; if one cup eaten is your whole meal then it is low.

It is a good idea to figure out how many calories you want for snacks and meals based on your calorie intake for the day. Generally it is a good idea to have three snacks a day totaling no more than 100 calories each. From there you can divide up the rest of the calories between your meals as you see fit.
What do the percentages mean?

First you need to know what **Daily Values** are. This is a set of values given for how much you should consume of certain nutrients based on a 2000 calorie diet. For example, you should only eat 65g of fat or less per day. The % Daily Value is a calculation of how much nutrient is in a serving of that particular food. Taking the fat as an example again, the macaroni and cheese contains 12 g of total fat per serving-this is 18% of the total intake allowed for the day.

The percentages are really good to look at if you want a quick answer to whether or not the product is a good choice for you. For the nutrients that you want to make sure you get enough of such as fiber, vitamin A, C, Calcium and Iron you would follow these percentage rules shown in the purple box. The higher the percentage the more nutrient dense it is and a better choice.

However, if you want to limit some nutrients such as fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium the percentages would work as shown in the red box. In this case the higher the percentage the less the product is a good choice for you.

These percentages are a good tool to use no matter what your calorie intake for the day is at it shows you proportional values.

A word about the ingredient list

Even the ingredient list can be helpful when deciding on a product. First, ingredient lists are listed by **weight**, the highest being first. The first 3 things listed will be the dominant ingredients and will show you what you are really consuming.

In this ingredient list for a yogurt with fruit you can see the first three ingredients are **milk, blueberries, and sugar**. Since sugar is in the top three ingredients (not to mention followed by 2 more sugars) it shows there are is a lot of sugar in the product and it won’t be the best choice for yogurt. Also, yogurt doesn’t need a whole lot of processing so more than 5 ingredients seem excessive.

**Ingredients:** Cultured grade A lowfat milk, blueberries, sugar, fructose syrup, high fructose corn syrup, contains less than 1% of modified corn starch, pectin, kosher gelatin, sodium phosphate, malic acid, natural flavor, calcium phosphate. Contains active yogurt cultures including **L. acidophilus**.

**Resources**

**FDA Nutrition Label** - a good resource from the FDA for learning more about food labels.

**Nutrition Label Quiz** – a good quiz to see if you can interpret nutrition labels.

**More Label Information** - ISU Extension publication on nutrition label reading.