

Food Labels and a Healthy Diet

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) require most foods contain a label with information about the levels of certain nutrients and the ingredients. This information is presented in an easy-to-read format that allows you to compare foods and decide which ones to include as a part of your healthy diet.

Read on to learn more about food labels and how to use them to choose foods that are part of a healthy diet.

Understanding the Food Label

The following information is required to be listed on the food label. The information is grouped into categories for easy reference:

- **Servings:** The top of the label lists the serving size and the number of servings per container. You should take careful note of this section since the information on the rest of the label is based on one serving.
- **Calories:** This section lists the total calories in one serving as well as the amount of these calories that come from fat. You should look for foods that get a maximum of 20 percent of their total calories from fat.
- **Nutrients:** Most packaging lists the amount of total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, dietary fiber and certain vitamins per serving. The percent daily value section can help you determine if the food is a good source of a particular nutrient. If the daily value (DV) is 5 percent or less, the food is not a good source of the nutrient, while if the daily value is 20 percent or greater, the food is a good source of the nutrient.

Using the Food Label

The information on the food label, especially the percent daily values, can help you to do the following:

- **Limit fat, cholesterol and sodium.** Too many of these nutrients can increase the risk of heart disease and high blood pressure. While some fat is necessary to provide our bodies with energy and aid in the absorption of certain vitamins, too much fat can lead to weight gain and obesity.
- **Increase dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron.** These nutrients can help to promote good health and reduce the risk of certain diseases, such as osteoporosis.

In order to get the most benefit from reading food labels, you should adhere to the following daily limits (based on a 2,000 calorie diet):

- **Total fat:** 65g or less
- **Saturated fat:** 20g or less
- **Carbohydrates:** 300g
- **Protein:** 50g
- **Dietary fiber:** 25g
- **Cholesterol:** less than 300mg
- **Sodium:** less than 2400mg

Understanding Calories From Fat

While foods that are low in calories and low in total fat are generally healthier, you should pay careful attention to the number of these calories that come from fat. Food that has 10 calories but that gets five of those calories from fat may not be the healthiest choice.

Understanding calories from fat can help you to continue enjoying the foods you love while maintaining your health with a balanced diet. When reading the nutrition label, pay special attention to the number of calories from fat and try to limit your fat calories to 30 percent of your total daily calories.

Since each fat gram has nine calories, you can use the following formula to figure out the percentage of calories from fat:

1. Multiply the number of fat grams by 9.
2. Divide the number of total calories by this number.
3. Multiply the result by 100 to get the percentage.

Although this formula can help you decide whether the food is a healthy choice, remember not to place too much emphasis on calories from fat for one particular food. Your goal should be to reduce the total number of calories from fat in your diet.

Advertising Restrictions

The FDA also regulates the nutrient content claims that a food manufacturer can make. The following advertising can be used under strict guidelines.

Some of the nutrient content claims that the FDA controls are:

- **Free:** For food to claim that it is free of a nutrient (e.g., fat-free), it must have either no amount or a very small amount of that nutrient. Labels can claim the food is free of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, sugar or calories.
- **Low:** Foods that are low in a nutrient can be eaten without worrying you will exceed your daily dietary guidelines. Labels can claim that the food is low in fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium or calories.
- **Reduced:** For food to claim it is reduced, its nutrient or calorie level must be 25 percent less than a regular product.
- **Light:** A light food must contain 1/3 fewer calories, half of the fat or half of the sodium of a regular product.

Additional Resources

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov

Here when you need us.

Call: 844-207-5465

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: LivingME

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