

Understanding Food Labels

Knowing how to read and interpret food labels is a powerful tool when it comes to making healthy food choices.

Food label claims such as “low fat,” “fat-free” and “a good source of” can be confusing for people not familiar with what those terms mean. Use this information to become more nutrition label savvy and to make healthy choices based on fact, and not unsubstantiated food claims.

What to Look For

- **Serving size:** The serving size (or amount of product in one serving) is important in determining the nutritional value of a food. Often times, the actual serving size and the number of total servings in the package are different from what a consumer would perceive to be one serving. For example, if the serving size of a product is one cup and you consume two cups of it, you are getting twice the amount of calories, fat and other nutrients on the label.
- **Percent daily values:** Here, a consumer can find out how a food fits into a daily meal plan. Daily Values (DV) are average levels of nutrients for a person eating 2,000 calories a day. Percent DV are for the entire day, not just one meal or snack. A food with a 10% DV means that food contains 10% of the daily needs of that nutrient for a person consuming 2,000 calories per day. Keep in mind, the DV is an average amount. Some people may need to eat more or less than 2,000 calories per day or may require more or less than 100% DV for some nutrients. Five percent or less is low DV; 20% or more is high DV.
- **Ingredients list:** Ingredients are always listed in descending order by weight. The ingredients present in the largest amounts are listed first. For example, for a bread to be truly whole grain, “whole” must be the first word in the ingredient list. If the first word is “enriched,” that food may contain some whole grains, but they are not the primary ingredient. Thus, it is not truly a whole-grain product.
- **Total calories and fat:** Find out how many calories are in a single serving and the number of calories that come from fat. For people watching their weight, cutting back on total calories and fat is a good strategy.

Approved Food Label Claims

The FDA has strict guidelines for how certain food label terms can be used. Here are some of the most common claims on food packages:

- **Low calorie:** Less than 40 calories per serving.
- **Low cholesterol:** Less than 20mg of cholesterol and 2g or less of saturated fat per serving.

- **Reduced:** The product has 25% less of the specified nutrient or calories compared to the original product. Keep in mind, reduced-fat foods do not necessarily mean low calorie or reduced-calorie. Often, the fat has just been replaced with added sugar.
- **Good source of:** Provides at least 10% of the DV of a particular vitamin or nutrient per serving.
- **Calorie-free:** Less than 5 calories per serving. Many beverages claim to be “calorie-free” when in fact there may be 10 to 40 calories in the package.
- **Fat-free or sugar-free:** The product has less than one-half of a gram of fat or sugar per serving.
- **Low sodium:** The product has less than 140 mg of sodium per serving.
- **High in:** Provides 20% or more of the DV of a specified nutrient per serving.
- **High fiber:** Has five or more grams of fiber per serving.

FDA also sets standards for health-related claims on food labels to help consumers identify foods that are rich in nutrients and may help to reduce their risk for certain diseases. For example, health claims may highlight the link between calcium and osteoporosis, fiber and calcium, heart disease and fat or high blood pressure and sodium.

Resources

More information about nutritional facts on food labels can be found online:

- American Dietetic Association: www.eatright.org
- Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.org
- MyPlate: www.choosemyplate.gov

Some of the content on this page was gathered from the website for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov

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