

The Nutrition Facts Label: “What’s in That Package of Food?”

Food labels help us find out what is in the packaged foods we eat. The Nutrition Facts panel and the ingredients list are two important parts. They tell you what you will be eating, which can help you make better choices. Reading and understanding the information on food labels can be overwhelming. We will focus on the serving size, calories, total fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, and total carbohydrates.

Serving Size

This is the first thing to look at because all of the other information on the label is based on the serving size, and many packages contain more than one serving. But the serving size on the package may not be what you usually eat. If you would usually have less or more than the stated serving size, you have to change all the amounts. For example, if a serving size is 1/2 cup cooked rice and you eat 1 cup, which is 2 servings, you will need to double all the values. Most serving sizes are stated in cups, ounces, or pieces of the food.

Calories

Total calories are given for the stated serving size. So if you eat more or less than one serving, you will have to do a little arithmetic. On the same line you will see a number for calories from fat. If you want, you can figure out the percentage of calories you will get from fat.

Nutrition Facts	
Per 28 g	1 serving size
Amount	% Daily Value*
Calories 280	
Fat 5 g	7%
Saturated Fat 2 g + <i>Trans</i> Fat 0 g	10%
Cholesterol 20 mg	7%
Sodium 540 mg	22%
Carbohydrate 49 g	16%
Fibre 3 g	12%
Sugars 7 g	
Protein 10 g	
Vitamin A 4%	Vitamin C 4%
Calcium 15%	Iron 4%

This is important if you are interested in how much fat you are eating, but it doesn’t tell you the kind of fat. Divide the calories from fat by the calories in the serving size and then multiply by 100. In this example, divide the 45 fat calories by the 280 in the serving and you get 0.16. Then multiply by 100 to get 16%.

Total Fat, Cholesterol, and Sodium

The total fat number includes good fats (polyunsaturated and monounsaturated), bad fat (saturated), and trans fat in grams (a unit of

weight). You can change grams to calories by multiplying by 9. In the example, multiply the 5 g (total fat) by 9 to get 45 calories. This is the same number of calories as shown in the calories from fat line. The amount of calories in all the fats should add up to the calories for total fat. If they don’t, (due to the arithmetic) they will be close.

Remember our warning about trans fats! Due to the way food companies are allowed to do the arithmetic, any food with up to 1/2 (0.5) g per serving of trans fat can be listed as having no trans fat, but you still could be getting some. If the ingredients list has the words *partially hydrogenated* or *hydrogenated*, the product contains trans fat (even if the amount of trans fats per serving is 0 g). So trans fats could add up, especially if you have more than one serving.

The cholesterol line tells you the amount of cholesterol by serving size. Because cholesterol is found only in animal foods, this line may be missing or show 0 g for foods not made with animal products. If you are watching the amount of cholesterol you eat, you need to be especially careful because even if a food does not have any cholesterol, it may have bad or trans fat, particularly if it is a processed food. Trans fats can raise your blood cholesterol level more than the cholesterol from food.

To tell if the fat, cholesterol, or sodium is high or low, look at the “% Daily Value” column. Any value of 20% or more is high. If you want to eat less or want to eat more than

one serving, look for values of 5% or less. You can see in this example that the values for total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol are low but sodium is high. Note that % values are not available for trans fats and protein, as there are no recommended Daily Values for them. If you want to learn more about these recommended Daily Values, go to the MyPlate Website, <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>.

Total Carbohydrate, Dietary Fibre, and Sugars

This section breaks out values for dietary fibre and sugars and is important for people who want to watch or count their carbohydrates. You will also be able to see if a food is high or low in fibre. Most of us should be eating more fibre. Note that there is no % Daily Value for sugar. However, for many people with diabetes, it’s the total amount of carbohydrate that matters, not the specific kind. A general guideline is to keep this amount between 45 to 60 g per meal, assuming three meals a day.

Ingredients List

Always check a package’s ingredients list. It will show you what is in the food you will be eating. Ingredients are listed in order *by weight*. If you see sugar listed first, then the food contains more sugar than anything else. Remember, too, when you see the words *partially hydrogenated* or *hydrogenated*, the product contains trans fats (even if the amount for trans fats is 0 g).