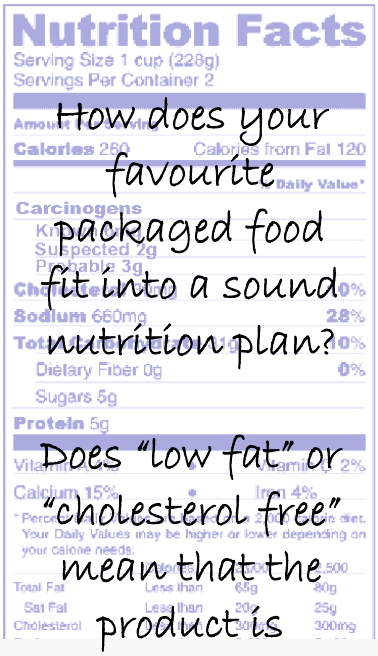
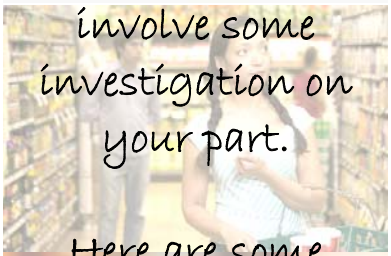
Interpreting Food Labels



How does your favourite packaged food fit into a sound nutrition plan?

Does "low fat" or "cholesterol free" mean that the product is healthy?

Implementing a healthy eating plan might involve some investigation on your part.



Here are some tips on reading food labels to help you along your way.

New labelling regulations set forth by Health Canada [1] will make product information more available, more consistent and easier to read. Knowing how to read labels will help you make more informed food choices and ultimately plan a nutritious, well-balanced diet.

#1: Inspect the Ingredients

The ingredients are listed in descending order i.e. from the highest to lowest amount. A list beginning with fat, salt, or sugar, should trigger some warning bells. However, these ingredients aren't always obvious. For example, lard, tallow, coconut or palm oil are high in saturated fat even though they are from a plant source. Similarly, hydrogenated items such as shortening should be regarded with caution as they are a source of trans fat. In addition, look for ingredients ending in 'ose', such as sucrose or dextrose, as these are simply sugars that are hidden behind scientific terms. Generally, the more nutritious choices tend to be represented by a shorter ingredient list.

 # 2: Evaluate the Claims

Here are some tips to navigate through the promises:

"Low in saturated fat" means that there is less than 5 grams of saturated fat and trans fat combined per serving.

"*Low in fat*" means that there is <3 grams of total fat per serving. Keep in mind that just because a food item is low-fat, it does not necessarily mean that it is nutritious (e.g. candies)

"*Calorie-reduced*" products contain 25% less energy than the regular version, but this does not guarantee a low-calorie product.

"*Source of Fibre"* indicates that there are at least 2 grams of dietary fibre per serving, while a *"High Source of Fibre"* contains at least 4 grams of fibre per serving.

"*Cholesterol-free"* is not interchangeable with "Fat-free". Plant products do not contain cholesterol, but may still be high in fat (e.g. french fries)

"Sodium-free" mean that there is <5 milligrams of sodium per serving.

"Light" products can be either "reduced in fat" or "reduced in calories." Beware of products using "light" or "lite" which may only refer to colour or flavour, not calories or fat.

Health Canada. Food labelling. Available from: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/index_e.html [cited 2007 01 March].

#3: Review the Facts

While looking at the ingredients and nutrition claims are important, reviewing the "facts" is the best way to get to the bottom of the story. A 'Nutrition Facts' table (similar to the one shown to the right) is now mandatory for all pre-packaged foods.

Nutrition Facts			
Per ¾ cup (50 g)			
Amount		**% Daily Value**	
Calories 210			
Fat 7 g			11 %
Saturated 2.0 g + Trans fat 0.1 g			11 %
Cholesterol 0 mg		0 %	
Sodium 740 mg			31 %
Carbohydrate 35 g			12 %
Fibre 2 g			8 %
Sugar 3 g			
Protein 4 g			
Vitamin A 0%		Vitamin C	0 %
Calcium 2%		Iron	20 %

Where do I start?

Always start by looking at the **serving size** specified on the package. Keep in mind that if you consume more (or less) than the stated serving size, you need to adjust the information accordingly (by multiplying or dividing by the amounts shown) to get an accurate estimation of how much nutrition you are getting. Keep in mind that serving sizes on labels are based on amounts that are usually consumed and do not always correspond to those suggested by Canada's Food Guide. In addition, there is a wider range of values that constitutes a serving size for the same type of product. For example, for "Ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, puffed and coated, flaked, extruded, without fruit or nuts" or "very high fibre cereals", a serving size can range anywhere from 20-45 g.

What should I look for?

While other nutrients may appear on the label, the new regulations state that the information for Calories and the 13 nutrients shown in the example must be included. While there are many nutrients provided by our diet, these nutrients are of particular significance to the health of Canadians. Emphasize food items that have: lower values for **fat** (especially *saturated* and *trans fat*), **cholesterol**, and **sodium** and higher contributions of **fibre** and **vitamins/minerals**.

What does it mean overall?

The % Daily Value (%DV) refers to the general daily recommendations for a healthy diet and is based on an average intake of 2000 calories. However, this value varies depending on your age, sex, and state of health. %DV can help you determine if a food contains or lacks certain nutrients. According to Health Canada:

- A food is low in saturated fat or trans fat if it has a %DV of 10% or less for these nutrients.
- A food is low in fat, sodium, or cholesterol if it has a %DV of 5% or less for these nutrients.
- A food is high in calcium, iron or fibre if it has a %DV of 15% or more for these nutrients.

Always remember that the %DV value is in reference to the stated serving size.

#4. Put it All Together

Now that you're an expert in deciphering food labels, just one final thought: don't get stuck overanalyzing each food item. While labels can help you determine where a particular food item fits with respect to a healthy diet, it is your overall intake that matters more than the individual components.

The Prostate Education & Research Centre

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