

READING NUTRITION LABELS

Program Resource

Companies use all sorts of gimmicks to fool you into believing their products are healthy. The only way to actually know how healthy a packaged food is, is to master the art of reading nutrition labels. Here's how:

Ingredients

The place to look for what you are actually eating is the ingredient list. Ingredients are listed in order of quantity. If there are a lot of ingredients with really long names that you can't pronounce, consider whether this product is worth eating.

Watch out for hidden sugar names

Anything ending in 'ose' (glucose, fructose, dextrose, sucrose, lactose, maltose etc.) • agave • barley malt • brown rice syrup • cane (sugar, juice, crystals, solids) • caramel • ethyl maltol • dextran • carob syrup • fruit juice • corn syrup • high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) • any name that includes the word sugar

Limit or avoid these additives

Artificial colourings and flavourings • sodium benzoate • partially hydrogenated oils (trans fats) • nitrates and nitrites • artificial sweeteners (aspartame, acesulfame, sucralose, saccharin etc.)

Calories

These don't really matter that much as we all have different caloric needs. Don't focus only on this number.

Serving Size

The only reason to look at the serving size is so you know how much protein, fat, fiber and carbs you will get by eating the amount listed. Serving sizes are only suggestions — you decide how much you need.

Example: If a label says one serving is ½ cup and has 8g fat, 4g protein and 2g carbs — and you eat 1 cup — multiply all numbers by 2. Ignore all percentages. Gram amounts are much more useful.

Carbohydrates & Fiber

Total Carbohydrates is the big bold number on the label. Sugar, dietary fiber, and sugar alcohol are subcategories underneath — they're all already included in the total carbohydrates number. It's better to look at Total Carbohydrates because it gives a more complete picture of how it will affect blood sugar.

Fiber does not raise blood sugar, so you can calculate “net carbohydrates” to better estimate blood sugar impact:

Net Carbs Formula

Total Carbohydrates – Fiber = Net Carbs Example: 13g total carbohydrate – 3g fiber = 10g net carbs

Fat

Look at the Total Fat number. The fat to pay the most attention to is trans-fat — keep this as low as possible, preferably 0g. Check the ingredient list for hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated vegetable oils and limit or avoid these.

Protein

Grams of protein on the label tells you how much you need to eat to reach around 20–30g per meal. Always factor in the serving size and how much you actually eat.

Example: 1 large egg contains 6–7g protein. If you eat 2 eggs, multiply by 2 — that's around 12–14g protein.

Watch Out for Health Claims

Don't be fooled by gimmicky statements. The only way to know the true health value of a product is to examine the nutrition and ingredients label on the back.

Common misleading claims

“Fat-free” • “All natural” • “Sugar-free” • “No sugar added” • “Light” • “Zero trans fats” • “Gluten-free” • “Made with real fruit”

Whole grain & multigrain claims

These words don't guarantee the product is primarily made with wholegrains. Check the ingredient list — wholegrain should be the first ingredient. Limit or avoid anything with “enriched” in front of it (means nutrients were stripped then partially added back). Real wholegrain products should contain at least 3g of fiber per serving.

Quick Reference

- ✓ **Look at the ingredient list first**
- ✓ **Calculate net carbs: total carbs – fiber**
- ✓ **Trans-fat should be low or 0g**
- ✓ **Aim for 20–30g protein per meal**
- ✓ **Ignore percentages — use gram amounts**
- ✓ **Don't trust health claims on the front of the package**