



HalfmileFitness

Healthy Living For The Young at Heart: Let Your Journey Begin...

Does My Food Count?



How To Guide For Understanding A Food Label

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Introduction

Congratulations!

You have arrived at that point in which you wish to have a better understanding of that dreaded “tag” that is found on the back of nearly every canned, frozen, bagged, boxed food or drink that you see in every aisle inside the grocery store.

Maybe it is because you have a desire to know exactly how much food you will be taking in for weight management. Or perhaps you received a diagnosis from your physician to start incorporating certain foods within your eating plan. It could simply be that you are tired of that “tag” staring back, serving no purpose but to taunt you because you purposely choose to ignore reading it.

Within this mini eBook, I will give a breakdown on understanding and how to read a food label. This is important when you are looking at which foods to limit or add to your eating plan.

We at Half Mile Fitness welcome any comments or questions that you have.

You can contact me at:

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Kindest Regards,

Valerie

“Serving” Definition

Before going into understanding a food label, let us first look into the meaning of what is a “serving.” A serving is the *quantity* of food or drink suited for one person. This is the first important element to take notice to when reading a nutrition label. Serving sizes on labels are simplified to make it easier to read. These sizes are provided in familiar units such as ounces, cups or pieces followed by the metric amount, e.g., the number of grams. Recommended daily servings are based on age, level of activity and weight. Because every body needs is different, you can find out how many servings you need clicking [here](#).

Let use a soup can label as an example:

Take a look at the label on this soup can. You will notice that the serving (*quantity*) size is 1 cup. Underneath, you will see that there are 2 cup servings per container. This means that all of the information on this label would be doubled if you ate the whole can. This rule applies to calories, fats, sodium and nutrients the soup contains.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 cup	
Serving Per Container 2	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 70	Calories from Fat 20
% Daily Values*	
Total Fat 2g	3%
Saturated Fat 0.5g	3%
Trans Fat 0g	
Sodium 620mg	26%
Total Carbohydrate 10g	3%
Dietary Fiber 1g	4%
Sugars 1g	
Protein 4g	8%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.	

Labels have become more user-friendly over the years. For example, a can of soda used to be 1.5 or 2 servings. But now the entire can of soda is considered 1 serving because most people will drink the whole can. A 20 oz bottle though, is more than 2 servings.

Calories Meaning: “Soup Breakdown”

After viewing the serving size, you would want to look at the the number of calories. Calories are measurements of energy a food or beverage provides. Every food has a number of calories. Let us merge these last two sentences together and come up with a conclusion: Calories are the measurement for how much energy it takes to break down the food. The higher the calories, the longer it will take to break it down. In our soup label example we have 70 calories per serving (*in 1 cup*). If we consumed the whole container, we would be getting 140 calories.

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Depending on the label, the following list are the main categories you'll find:

●Calories ●Carbohydrates ●Protein ●Fat ●Sodium ●Vitamins and minerals

Let's take a look at these categories see what they mean when it comes to our diet.

The Count on Carbs

Are all carbs created equal?

Carbohydrates supply energy to the body through the foods we eat. We need carbohydrates to have energy and to be healthy. Any diet that tells you to eliminate them completely is unhealthy.

Carbohydrates are broken down into two sub-categories – fiber and sugars. We need both. It is all about the amount we eat that affects our health. I will explain the functionalities of both:

Fiber

Many people do not get enough fiber in their diets. You'll want to look for foods that are high in this type of carbohydrate.

Fiber helps to lower cholesterol, controls diabetes, prevents colon cancer and helps to regulate digestion by aiding the movement of waste through the intestines. In detailed terms, the fiber "scrapes" the insides of your stomach and intestines, keeping these areas clean & unclogged. Fiber rich foods include whole grains such as bran, wheat and oats, along with certain berries and legumes. Raw vegetables tend to contain more fiber per serving.

Sugars

Sugar is broken down from carbohydrates and is easy to enter most organs and tissues. This is the preferred type of fuel for your brain and red blood cells. Unlike fiber, sugars are digested quickly and are easily broken down into glucose, which is then used for energy. If too much sugar is eaten at one time, glucose levels can spike which causes diabetes. Depending on the type of diabetes, you'll want to limit how many grams of sugar you get in your diet. Also decrease your intake of foods made with refined starches and processed sugars such as white bread, white rice, desserts, candies and sugary drinks.

In terms of calories, every gram (*a measurement in weight*) of carbohydrates contains 4 calories. So if you want to know how many calories in the food come from carbohydrates you can multiply your carbohydrate grams by four. Then you can look at the total calories in the serving to determine the percentage of calories that come from them.

In our soup can example, 40 out of the 70 calories per serving come from carbohydrates.

Total Carbohydrate 10g

(10 x 4 = 40)

Dietary Fiber 1g

(1 x 4 = 4)

Sugars 1g

(1 x 4 = 4)

There are 8 calories altogether that comes from both fiber and sugars.

Protein Power

Protein by definition, is a large molecule needed by the human body for growth and maintenance. Our body must have protein to build structures – (*which is the construction and arrangement of body parts, tissues and organs.*)

Most of the structures inside us consist of protein. In order to have the building blocks for cell life and developing muscles, we need to eat foods containing this important molecule.

In terms of calories, every gram of protein contains 4 calories. A food label will display how many grams of protein it contains. Foods high in protein include nuts, lean meats, whole grain foods and dairy products.

In our soup can example, 16 out of the 70 calories per serving come from protein.

Protein 4g

(4 x 4 = 16)

Fat Facts

Fats insulate our organs such as the heart, kidneys and liver from the heat and cold. It also provides backup when the body suffers from malnutrition. We need certain fats just like we need other nutrients in our food. Take into account that each gram of fat consumed provides more than *twice* as many calories as compared to a gram of protein or carbohydrate. (1 gram of fat = 9 calories)

In our soup can example, 18 out of the 70 calories per serving come from total fat.

Total Fat 2g

(2 x 9 = 18)

The 3 major categories of fats are unsaturated, saturated and trans fats:

Unsaturated fats come from plant sources. At room temperature unsaturated fats should stay liquid. These are considered healthy fats that is good for our body. Unsaturated fats helps lower “bad” cholesterol and raise “good” cholesterol in the blood. This “lowering” helps to prevent certain diseases and stroke. These fats also help our digestive system to run smoothly.

Saturated fats come from animal sources. These fats turn solid at room temperature. A diet that is high in saturated fats is unhealthy for us. These fats contribute to high cholesterol and can ultimately lead to certain diseases, stroke and other disorders.

If your aim is to lower cholesterol, less than 7% of total calories should come from saturated fat. That's about 16 grams per day or 140 calories for a person eating 2,000 calories.

In our soup can examples below, there 18 calories of total fat, 4.5 of it comes from saturated fat. We will assume that 13.5 calories comes from unsaturated fat since there is zero trans fats on the label.

Total Fat 2g

($2 \times 9 = \underline{18}$)

Saturated Fat 0.5g

($0.5 \times 9 = \underline{4.5}$) - (Remember, each 1 gram of fat is 9 calories)

Trans fats is a category of fats that come from altering the chemical structure of an unsaturated fat. Another name it is known by is hydrogenated fats. This involves the process of taking a liquid unsaturated fat to a solid trans fat by adding hydrogen atoms to the molecules. Margarine and processed foods are a few examples.

For many years it was a misconception that trans fats were as healthy as unsaturated fats, but that has been proven to be incorrect. Because of the bad press, many food manufacturers are removing it from their products. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) now requires that trans fats be listed on food labels. It's a good idea to avoid any food that has trans fats in it. These fats have no nutritional value and are in fact harmful for us.

There is no trans fats on our soup can label.

Trans Fat 0g

Salt Sense

Another nutrient that food labels have on its list is sodium. Sodium is the fancy, scientific term for salt. Salt helps maintain the fluid in our blood cells, maintain blood pressure and control the way our muscles and nerves work. For normal blood pressure we should aim for less than 2400 mg or less daily.

Too much sodium causes our bodies to hold onto water and in turn raises our blood pressure, which can eventually lead to heart disease and stroke. For high blood pressure, always consult with a physician about what healthy amount of sodium is recommended. Then you'll want to look for labels that have low amounts of sodium or are even free from it. Some foods are labeled as "low sodium" but you still need to look at the label and see where it fits in with your needs.

In our soup can example, there is 620 mg of salt per 1 cup serving. Since there are 2 servings per container, we would consume 1240 mg of salt if we ate the whole can of soup.

Sodium 620mg

Eating Vitamins and Minerals

Vitamins and minerals keep our bodies functioning properly. These are essential nutrients that help to boost the immune system and promote normal growth and development.

While a multivitamin can be effective in receiving the recommended amount of nutrients, the best way of getting our vitamins and minerals is through the natural foods we eat. Vitamins and minerals that are in its natural state are easier for your body to absorb. Always strive to find foods that are high in vitamins and minerals.

What does Percent Daily Value mean on food labels?

Dietary Fiber 1g **4%**

The percent daily value refers to how much we need every day as part of a healthy diet. For example, there is 1 gram of fiber in one serving of soup. One gram of fiber provides 4% of the daily recommended amount of fiber. Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

- If you eat less than 2,000 calories a day, this product will contribute more than 4% of fiber toward the daily recommended amount.
- If you eat more than 2,000 calories, this product will contribute less than 4% of fiber toward the daily recommended amount.

Understanding Ingredients

The other list you'll find on a food label is a list of ingredients. Ingredients on products are listed in order from greatest amount to least amount in the food. This list of ingredients can be very helpful in deciding if a food is something you want to eat or not.

Take Note of These List of Ingredients:

1. Corn syrup (highly processed sugar)
2. Hydrogenated oils
3. Mono-sodium glutamate (MSG)
4. Artificial coloring
5. Artificial sweeteners (sucralose, aspartame, saccharin)

Ingredients that are not natural and come from chemical processing are generally not good for our body. A rule of thumb to follow is that if the ingredient is hard to pronounce, we probably should avoid it.

Once you start reading food labels, you'll be surprised to find out how many additives and preservatives are in processed foods. While some foods with labels are indeed healthy for us, there are a lot of foods that come in cans, boxes and bags that contain harmful ingredients.

No Labels?

When it comes to nutrition, the best thing we can do is look for foods that don't require labels. These are foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts and lean meats. The less processed our foods are, the healthier it will be.

Other foods have labels, but are also close to their natural state. This includes food such as:

- 1. Milk**
- 2. Yogurt**
- 3. Whole grain bread**
- 4. Whole grain cereals**
- 5. Natural peanut butter**
- 6. Natural cheese**

Conclusion

Food labels do not have to be intimidating. The more we familiarize ourselves, reading and understanding them become easier. There are “go-to” foods that we can just pick up without revisiting the label every time.

Plan to spend some extra time at the grocery store when getting accustomed to reading food labels. Before shopping, make a list of the items you need to get. Then make a list of additional foods that you’d like to merge into your eating plan. In addition, you can make up a list of foods you’d like to avoid. Perhaps something you’ve always loved has way more cholesterol than you thought. Spend some time looking for a substitute that’s on the healthier side.

Look for foods that are high in nutrition and low on saturated fats, artificial chemicals, cholesterol and processed sugars. These guidelines will aid in preventing certain diseases, having more energy and shrinking the waistline.

Credits:

" Woman Buying Salad - Image courtesy of [Ambro] /FreeDigitalPhotos.net"