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Just the facts on food labels



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Thanks to the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, food labeling is required for most packaged foods. This includes breads, cereals, canned/frozen foods, snacks, desserts and beverages. Food labeling isn't required for fruits, vegetables and fish.

THE NUTRITION FACTS PANEL

Located on the food label is an area that's known as the "Nutrition Facts panel." The panel must include information on calories, calories from fat, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrate, dietary fiber, sugars, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron.

Servings: Near the top of the panel are the serving size and number of servings per container. In order for you to compare similar foods, serving sizes are standardized in an amount of food "customarily consumed" and use a "common household measure that is appropriate to the food" such as cups, grams, milliliters, ounces, tablespoons and teaspoons. Remember, unless it's a single-serving package, the amount of each ingredient is only for a portion of the contents. If a food has four servings per container, then eating the entire contents literally quadruples the amount of calories, fat, cholesterol and so on.

Calories: Also near the top of the panel are the calories and calories from fat. If you want to get an idea of the percentage of fat in a food, simply divide the fat calories by the total calories. For example, a food that has 160 calories of which 80 are from fat is 50% fat.

Total fat: Directly below the information on calories is a section on nutrients. The top of this section provides details about total fat. Noted under total fat are saturated fat (or "sat fat") and, as of Jan-

uary 2006, trans fat (or "trans fatty acids"). No more than about 10 percent of your caloric intake should come from saturated fat and trans fat combined. So if you consume 2,500 calories per day, the amount of saturated fat and trans fat shouldn't exceed about 250 calories (about 28 grams).

Cholesterol and sodium: Also having a negative impact on health are cholesterol (which is linked to heart disease) and sodium (which is linked to high blood pressure).

Your intake of cholesterol should be less than 300 milligrams per day; your intake of sodium should be less than 2,400 milligrams per day.

Total carbohydrate: Appearing next on the panel is a section on carbohydrates. Noted under carbohydrates are dietary fiber and sugars. Consuming foods that are high in fiber promotes healthy bowel function. Natural sugars (such as those in fruit juice) are better than refined sugars (such as those in corn syrup).

Protein: The Recommended Dietary Allowance of protein is about 0.36 grams per pound of bodyweight with all active individuals – not just those who lift weights – needing a bit more.

Vitamins and minerals: Information on vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron is required on the panel. This isn't to say that all other vitamins and minerals are unimportant; rather, these four micronutrients aren't typically consumed in sufficient amounts and, thus, demand greater awareness.

Percent Daily Values: An important term that's used on the panel is "Percent Daily Value" or "% Daily Value." It appears on the right-hand side of the panel and as a footnote at the bottom of the panel (provided that the label is large enough). Essentially, the Percent Daily Value is your allowable intake of a particular nutrient for the day. As a rule of thumb, a Daily Value that's 5 percent or less is low; a Daily Value that's 20 percent

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1/3 cup (30g)	
Servings Per Container about 23	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 110	Calories from Fat 10
%Daily Value*	
Total Fat 1g	2%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 370mg	15%
Total Carbohydrate 21g	7%
Dietary Fiber 2g	7%
Sugars 2g	
Protein 4g	
Vitamin A 0% • Vitamin C 0%	

or more is high. With a 2,000-calorie/day diet, for example, the panel recommends a daily intake of 65 grams of fat. Therefore, a food that has 6.5 grams of fat would have a Percent Daily Value of 10 percent.

Ingredients: If a food has more than one ingredient, they must be listed on the label. It must be understood that the ingredients in a product are listed by weight from most to least.

THE BOTTOM LINE

According to one survey, about 79 percent of Americans said that they frequently or occasionally check food labels. Nevertheless, about 44 percent of Americans said that they buy foods that are bad for them even after they read the labels.

Clearly, simply reading the information on food labels isn't enough. Individuals must also be disciplined enough to make wise choices. ♥

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