

# Understanding Food Labels

*Nutrition Facts at Your Fingertips*



# **Understanding Food Labels**

## Why do you need to know how to read food labels?

- *Food labels provide an easy way to evaluate the nutritional content of food.* Nutrition labels are required for almost all prepared foods such as cereals, breads, canned foods, frozen foods, snack foods, and beverages. Nutrition labeling for raw fish, fruits, and vegetables is voluntary.
- *Food labels can help you achieve nutritional balance in your diet.* Knowledge of the nutritional content in food can help you make more balanced nutritional choices. For example, if you like a particular food that happens to be high in sodium or fat, you can choose foods that are low in sodium or fat at other times during the day. This way, you can balance your overall daily intake.
- *Food labels can help you manage your weight and diet-related health issues.* Knowing the number of calories you actually consume is critical for weight management, whether your goal is to lose, gain, or maintain weight. Full knowledge of the nutrients in food can also help you manage health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or atherosclerosis.
- *Food labels help you make informed food purchasing decisions.* Accurate nutrition information is essential in order for you to completely understand the nature of a specific food product. Nutrition labels provide an easy way for you to quickly determine the dietary value of a food product. Without these labels, consumers would need a great deal of specialized knowledge – or would have to do a lot of research – to make informed food purchases.

## The three most important things on the food label:

- *Calories.* If you want to manage your weight, it's important to balance your calorie intake against the number of calories your body uses. Total calories are displayed on the left side of the label, and calories from fat are displayed to the right.
- *Servings.* The serving size is fundamental to figuring out the number of calories and amounts of nutrients you consume.
- *Percent daily values.* These values tell you whether the food is high or low in a particular nutrient. Use these values to determine whether a food choice has enough of a nutrient you want, or too much of a nutrient you prefer to limit.

## Things to remember about calorie information:

- *400 or more calories per serving is high.* As a general rule of thumb, 400 calories per serving is considered high, 100 calories per serving is moderate, and 40 calories per serving is low.
- *Nutrition labels are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.* The 2,000 calorie diet is just a point of reference intended to represent the energy intake of an average person. You must make adjustments to account for your own personal energy needs.
- *Your individual calorie needs are probably different.* People's true dietary needs are dependent on a variety of factors, including age, gender, metabolism, activity level, current weight, and desired weight.

## Things to remember about serving sizes:

- *Most packages contain more than one serving.* Many of us are tempted to think of a serving as whatever we might eat at one time, but many foods that appear to us to be a single serving may be much more. For example, a pint of ice cream is four servings. A 20-ounce soda is 2.5 servings.
- *The serving size on the label and how much you typically eat are frequently different.* Using the above examples, many people might usually eat a half or even a whole pint of ice cream. Many would generally drink the entire 20-ounce soda as well. This also holds true for other foods. A serving of meat is three ounces, but we would often eat much more in a single meal.
- *All of the nutrition data on the label is for one serving.* Since the information is for a single serving, and we typically consume more than a single serving of many types of foods, it's important to adjust the nutrition values on the labels to reflect how much we actually ate.

## Servings and everyday things:

Sometimes it's easier to visualize what a serving size is if we can compare it to the size of an object we commonly encounter. The following table shows some typical serving sizes, along with some everyday objects that correspond to these servings:

### The Bread, Cereal, Rice, and Pasta Group

1 cup of potatoes, rice, pasta (2 servings)	is a tennis ball
1/2 cup	is an ice cream scoop
1 pancake	is a compact disc (CD)
1/2 cup cooked rice	is a cupcake wrapper full
1 piece of cornbread	is a bar of soap
1 slice of bread	is an audiocassette tape
1 cup of pasta, spaghetti, cereal (2 servings)	is a fist
2 cups of cooked pasta (4 servings)	is a full outstretched hand

(FYI...1 slice of bread is one ounce or 1 serving; some rolls or bagels weight 3 to 5 ounces or more making them equal to 3 to 5 servings of bread)

### The Vegetable Group

1 cup green salad	is a baseball or a fist
1 baked potato (2 servings)	is a fist
3/4 cup tomato juice	is a small Styrofoam cup
1/2 cup cooked broccoli	is a scoop of ice cream or a light bulb
1/2 cup serving	is about 6 asparagus spears; 7-8 baby carrots or carrot sticks or 1 ear of corn on the cob

### The Fruit Group

1/2 cup of grapes (15 grapes)	is a light bulb
1/2 cup of fresh fruit	is 7 cotton balls
1 medium size fruit	is a tennis ball or a fist
1 cup of cut-up fruit	is a fist
1/4 cup of raisins	is a large egg

### The Milk, Yogurt, and Cheese Group

1 1/2 ounces cheese	is a 9-volt battery, 3 dominoes, or your index and middle fingers
1 ounce of cheese	is a pair of dice, your thumb or 1" cube
1/2 cup of ice cream	is a scoop

### The Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs, and Nuts Group

2 tablespoons peanut butter	is a ping-pong ball
1 teaspoon peanut butter	is a finger tip
1 tablespoon peanut butter	is a thumb tip
3 ounces cooked meat, fish, poultry	is a palm of hand/deck of cards/cassette tape
3 ounces grilled/baked fish	is a checkbook
3 ounces cooked chicken	is a chicken leg and thigh or breast

### Fats, Oils and Sweets

1 teaspoon butter, margarine	is the a stamp/thickness of your finger/thumb tip
2 tablespoons salad dressing	is a ping-pong ball

### Snack Foods

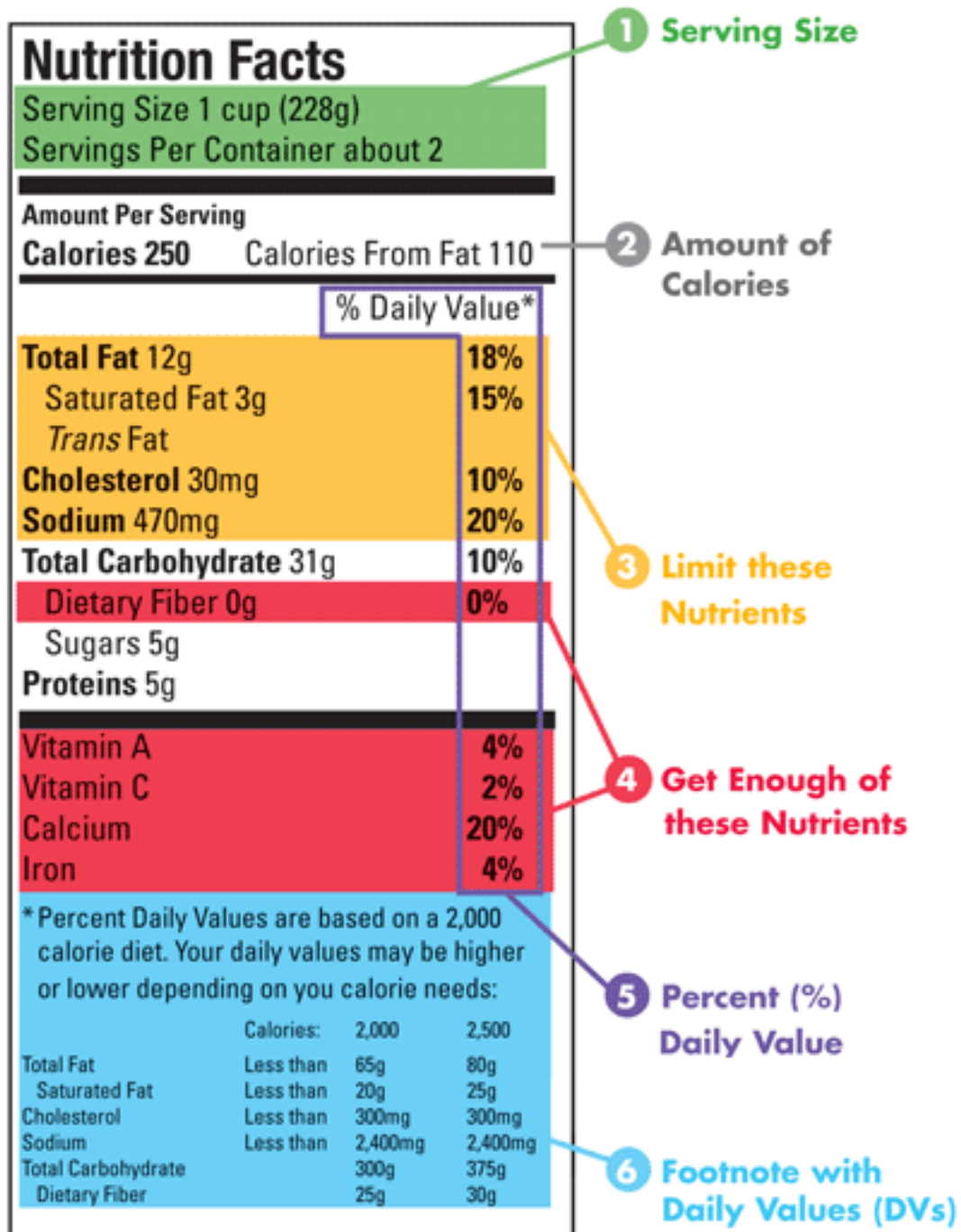
1 ounce of nuts or small candies	is one handful
1 ounce of chips or pretzels	is two handfuls
1/2 cup of potato chips, crackers or popcorn	is one man's handful
1/3 cup of potato chips, crackers, or popcorn	is one woman's handful

Source: Oregon State University Extension.

## Ways to use percent daily values:

- *Compare products or brands to see which foods are higher or lower in nutrients.* You can easily use the percent daily values to compare different food products, or different brands of a similar product. Serving sizes for the same foods are standardized, so you can quickly see which product or brands are higher in beneficial nutrients and lower in the nutrients that should be consumed in limited amounts.
- *Evaluate claims about nutrient and fat content.* Food product manufacturers use a variety of claims, such as “light,” “high fiber,” “reduced fat,” or “low cholesterol.” While there are standard requirements that manufacturers and packagers must meet to make these claims, it would be a lot of work for consumers to memorize all of these requirements. For example, for a product to be considered “extra lean,” it must contain less than 5 grams of fat, 2 grams of saturated fat, and 95 grams of cholesterol per serving. Using the percent daily values, you can simply make a quick evaluation on your own without having to memorize a lot of definitions.
- *Use the values to make balanced choices between healthy and less healthy food options.* It can be difficult to completely eliminate unhealthy foods from our diet. Using the percent daily values, though, you can balance the less healthy foods in your family’s diet with more healthy options to achieve a healthier overall diet.

## Nutrition Label Sections



Source: U.S. Food and Drug Administration Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

## **Get enough of these nutrients:**

Most Americans do not get enough of several key nutrients that improve many health functions and help prevent a variety of diseases and conditions. These nutrients are listed lowest on the food label, just above the footnote:

- Dietary Fiber
- Vitamins A and C
- Potassium
- Calcium
- Iron

## **Limit these nutrients:**

Most Americans get too much of certain types of nutrients that may increase their risk for certain health conditions, including high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer. These nutrients are listed high on the food label, just below the calorie information.

- Trans fat
- Saturated fat
- Cholesterol
- Sodium
- Sugars

## **The 5-20 rule:**

The 5-20 rule is an easy shorthand method that can be used to quickly evaluate nutrition labels in the store. Basically, if a nutrient is listed on the label as 5 percent or lower daily value, then that food is a poor source of that nutrient. If a nutrient is listed at 20 percent or above, the food is a good source of that nutrient.

The 5-20 rule can be applied to making both healthy and unhealthy food selections. We might want to avoid a “good” source of sodium, for example. Likewise, we might look for foods that are “bad” sources of saturated fat.

- 5 percent DV is low – if you want to consume less of a nutrient, choose foods with 5 percent or lower DV of that nutrient.
- 20 percent DV is high – if you want to consume more of a nutrient, choose foods with 20 percent or higher DV of that nutrient.



g Size 7.2 ounces (204 g)  
gs Per Container 1

Amount Per Serving  
Calories 70

Calories From Fat 5

% Daily Value

Total Fat 0.5 g

Saturated Fat 0g

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