How to Read Food Labels & Nutrition Facts

With a little practice and a systematic approach to reading labels, it will be easy to make the healthiest choices possible.

While the top of the label and the robust percentage of daily value are attractive, they are not the most important places to start reading a label.

1. **Start with the ingredient list**.
   This gives you a thumbs-up or thumbs-down to the packaged food based on your own criteria.

INGREDIENTS: SUGAR, ENRICHED FLOUR (WHEAT FLOUR, MALTED BARLEY FLOUR, NIACIN, IRON, THIAMINE MONONITRATE, RIBOFLAVIN, FOLIC ACID), ALMONDS, BUTTER (CREAM), NATURAL FLAVORS, BROWN RICE SYRUP, SALT, CINNAMON.
Contains Wheat, Almonds, Milk.

   a. Ingredients are listed in order of quantity.

   b. Look for food product ingredients (notice we didn't say food) that may be objectionable. For example, if you do not tolerate dairy, look for casein and other forms. Gluten, soy, and corn products can be found here as well.

   c. Next look for complicated chemical names that suggest preservatives, artificial flavors and colors, and artificial sweeteners.

      i. Examples of preservatives to limit include BHT, BHA, TBHQ

      ii. It is good to eat a variety of colored foods but not chemical dyes. Colors are numbered such as Blue #1 Brilliant Blue, Blue #2 Indigo Carmine, Citrus Red #2, Green #3 Fast Green, Red #40 Allura Red, Red #3 Erythrosine, Yellow #5 Tartrazine, Yellow #6 Sunset Yellow

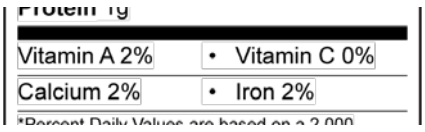
      iii. The most popular artificial sweeteners are Acesulfame-K, Aspartame, Equal®, NutraSweet®, saccharin, Sweet'n Low®, Sucralose, Splenda® and Sorbitol

2. **Focus on the serving size**. The serving size is often determined to help make the rest of the Nutrition Facts Box appear reasonable to the consumer. For example, a usual serving of small cookies may be three, but that would result in 270 calories and 39 grams of carbohydrates. 90 calories looks much better so the serving size is one cookie.

Nutrition Facts
Serving Size 1 Cookie (19g)
Servings Per Container 10

Amount Per Serving	
Calories 90	Calories from Fat 30
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 3.5g	5%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 5mg	2%
Sodium 25mg	1%
Total Carbohydrate 13g	4%

3. **Consider the % Daily Value of Nutrients**. Most of your micronutrients should be coming from foods without Nutrition Facts box (unprocessed).


Protein 1g
Vitamin A 2% • Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 2% • Iron 2%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000

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Health Claims and Their Definitions - At A Glance

High	20% or more of the Daily Value
Good	10-19% of the Daily Value
Light	at least 1/3 fewer calories or 50% less fat
Less or fewer	25% less of a nutrient or of calories
Calorie free	less than 5 calories
Low calorie	40 calories or less
Sugar free	less than 0.5 grams of sugar
Reduced sugar	at least 25% less sugar
Low fat	3 grams or less of fat
Sodium free or salt free	less than 5 mg of sodium
Low sodium	140 mg of sodium or less
Good source of fiber	2.5-4.9 grams of fiber

A Primer on "Eco-Labels"
Labels also try to tell us where and how our food was grown, raised or caught; what it ate; and what, if any, environmental impacts it's raising or harvesting might have. Companies WANT you to think their food is healthy, so here's how to tell the difference between which labels matter for your health – and which don't.

Labels can be differentiated by certified and non-certified. Choose certified labels as often as possible.

CERTIFIED LABELS

Grass-fed --implies that the animals spend their lives on pasture eating what nature intended; they are not treated with hormones or antibiotics.

Organic – For animal meat and dairy to be labeled "organic", the animal must never have been given antibiotics, hormones or GMO grasses.

GMO-Free/Non-GMO/Non-GMO Project Certified—produced without the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

Naturally Grown – reserved for food produced on small farms that abide by the USDA Certified Organic methods of growing and sell locally.

NON-CERTIFIED LABELS

No Hormones Administered/No Hormones/Hormone-Free—the USDA prohibits the use of hormones in the raising of hogs or poultry in the United States. Beef may have this label.

Free Range or Free Roaming—birds raised in this manner are able to go outdoors in order to engage in natural behaviors. However, birds only have to be allowed 5 minutes of open-air access a day to meet USDA requirements.

Pasture-Fed/Pasture-Raised – indicates that animals were raised with humane treatment and have higher levels of micronutrients. For beef, labels must also read

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"organic" and "grass-fed" to make sure the animals were not fed GMO grains, grasses, corn or soy.

Natural —cannot contain any artificial flavorings, color ingredients, chemical preservatives, or artificial or synthetic ingredients.

Minimally processed—a process that does not fundamentally alter the raw product.

Antibiotic-free or Raised Without Antibiotics—meat and poultry carrying these labels must not have had any antibiotics administered during the lifetime of the animal.

Cage-free—implies that hens laying eggs are uncaged inside barns or warehouses. It does not mean the hens have access to the outdoors, but that they do have the option to engage in many of their natural behaviors, such as walking, nesting and spreading their wings.

Certified Humane Raised and Handled—indicates that animals raised for dairy, lamb, poultry and beef products are treated in a humane manner and without the use of growth hormones or antibiotics.

Farmed Seafood or Fish Farming—involves raising fish commercially in tanks or other enclosures. Fish are either farmed or wild caught.

Wild Caught Seafood—applies to seafood caught in their natural habitats by fisheries.

No Additives—implies a product (or packaging) has not been enhanced with the addition of natural or artificial ingredients.

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