

just the facts: reading food labels

by Carol Plotkin, MS, RD



Sometimes the facts are not so clear. Consider food labels. While shopping for a food my daughter requested, I was directed to the cereal aisle by a mom who knew what I was looking for. She stated, "It's a snack that's supposed to be good for kids." The front of the package certainly looked like it. The eye-catching label stated the food was a good source of vitamin C and calcium. But the ingredients listed five forms of sugar, preservative and flavoring chemicals, and added vitamin C and calcium. The "wholesomeness" was clearly exaggerated.

There is a wealth of information contained on food packages, but a little detective work is needed to make sense of all it. What you learn will help you make healthy choices.

The package container identifies a food and acts as an advertisement, enticing you to buy it. Anything a food manufacturer feels is special will be listed on the front label. The package front may catch your eye, but the important information is listed under the Nutrition Facts label and ingredient list on the back of the package.

Here's what to look for:

Serving Size: The first place to look on a food label is at the serving size and number of servings per package. The calories and nutrients listed on the label are based on serving size. Pay attention to the number of servings stated and how many servings you eat. Most packages hold more than one serving.

Calories: Calories tell how much energy one serving of the food provides. The amount of calories from fat is also listed. Compare the number of calories and calories from fat with the serving size. A food such as ice cream has a small serving size with high calories. You'll want to follow the serving size recommendations when eating foods high in calories and fat.

Nutrients: Two categories of nutrients are listed under the Nutrition Facts: those to limit in your diet (total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, and sodium), and those you need to consume enough of daily (dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron). Looking at the nutrients list is a good way to distinguish healthy nutrient-dense foods from less healthy calorie-dense or high sodium ones.

Ingredients: The ingredient list identifies what's in the food in descending order. Look for products that contain the most whole and natural foods. Products that read like a science experiment tend to be highly processed. The Center for Science in the Public Interest has a useful website on food additives that can help you when reading food labels (www.cspinet.org/reports/chemcuisine.htm).

For more information on using the Nutrition Facts Label, visit www.cfsan.fda.gov/label.html.

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