



Reading Nutrition Labels and Food Packaging: Four Tips for Savvy Shopping

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While about two-thirds of Americans might use the Nutrition Facts panel at least some of the time, most people have only a limited understanding of what it means when reading nutrition labels. Use this guide to separate fact from fiction at the grocery store.

1. Focus on foods without labels.

Let's get this out of the way right now: Our goal is *not* to eat a lot of foods that require packaging or labels.

Picture your refrigerator full of green kale, yellow lemons, red apples, and a rainbow array of fresh fruits and vegetables, and your pantry brimming with whole grains and red, yellow, orange, black, white, and brown legumes, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and a sampling of nuts and seeds.

Most of these items can be purchased without packaging (unless the package just functions to hold a single ingredient, like raisins or beans), because they are intact, whole natural foods ... and we want these to comprise the bulk of our diet. However, there *are* a variety of prepared and lightly processed foods that make eating a whole-food, plant-based diet a lot easier to maintain—for example, whole-grain products like crackers, wraps, and pizza crusts; canned products like beans, tomato paste, and tomato sauce; boxed products like plant milks, and of course frozen fruits and vegetables.

2. Don't believe anything you read on the front of a package.

Food packages tend to be plastered with bold, exciting, and mostly meaningless, unregulated assertions. Rule number one, as registered dietitian [Jeff Novick](#) likes to say, is “don't believe anything you read on the front of a package.” In other words, be wary of deceptive marketing hype that makes junk foods appear healthy.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is the regulatory body that sets the [standards](#) for health claims on food packages and labels. However, the FDA's ability to regulate unfounded claims is severely limited, both legally and practically, due to limited resources for investigation and enforcement.

(For those of you who want a more detailed explanation of food packing claims, see my breakdown in the references section below.)

3. Read the ingredient list.

Reading the ingredient list is key. Aim for shorter ingredient lists with recognizable ingredients, and watch out for words ending “ose.” That signifies the substance is a sugar. Ingredients are listed in order of descending volume, so if you see wheat flour first followed by *glucose*, *high-fructose* corn syrup, and *maltose*, it's likely the total sugar from those three (by weight) adds up to more than the amount of flour.

In addition, don't fall for any promises that a flour is made from whole grains unless the ingredient listed is “100% whole wheat flour” or “100% whole grain spelt flour,” or the like.

4. Check the Nutrition Facts panel.

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Now you can move on to the Nutrition Facts panel—something to always check! Here’s an overview of what’s important:

Fat

Take a look at the total calories and the calories from fat. Aim for the fat calories to be 15% of total calories or less (so that’s fat calories/total calories ≤ 0.15). To figure out what percentage of calories come from fat, divide the calories from fat by the total calories per serving and multiply the result by 100. Doing this calculation will steer you toward foods that have little to no added fats and oils.

| Nutrition Facts | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Serving Size 3 oz. (85g) | | | |
| Serving Per Container 2 | | | |
| Amount Per Serving | | | |
| Calories | 200 | Calories from Fat 120 | |
| % Daily Value* | | | |
| Total Fat | 15g | | 20 % |
| Saturated Fat | 5g | | 28 % |
| Trans Fat | 3g | | |
| Cholesterol | 30mg | | 10 % |
| Sodium | 650mg | | 28 % |
| Total Carbohydrate | 30g | | 10 % |
| Dietary Fiber | 0g | | 0 % |
| Sugars | 5g | | |
| Protein | 5g | | |
| Vitamin A | 5% | • | Vitamin C 2% |
| Calcium | 15% | • | Iron 5% |
| *Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs. | | | |
| | Calories | 2,000 | 2,500 |
| Total Fat | Less than | 65g | 80g |
| Sat Fat | Less than | 20g | 25g |
| Cholesterol | Less than | 300mg | 300mg |
| Sodium | Less than | 2,400mg | 2,400mg |
| Total Carbonhydrate | | 300mg | 375mg |
| Dietary Fiber | | 25g | 30g |

Cholesterol

Next, note the **cholesterol** count. Plant foods don’t contain cholesterol, so if you see anything greater than “0” next to cholesterol, that’s a clue to reread the ingredient list and check for hidden animal products.

Sodium

The USDA has set 2,300 mg as the upper safe limit for daily sodium intake. If you eat *only* meals like the ones on our recipe pages, with almost no added salt, you’ll still easily get adequate sodium from whole plant foods. So if you eat any packaged or prepared foods, keeping to the 2,300 mg limit (or better yet, 1,500 mg) is possible only by eating foods that contain very little to

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no added sodium. Jeff Novick's handy trick is to make sure the milligrams of sodium don't exceed the calories per serving. Try Novick's trick using the sample label above: The sodium count (650 mg) far exceeds the calorie count (200). Verdict: Too much sodium.

Sugar

Finally, take a look at the sugars. We'd love to see the Nutrition Facts panel revised to include a separate line for "added sugars," but for now we see only total sugars. Remember that whole plant foods will contain some naturally occurring sugar, but if the total g of sugars is approaching the total g of carbohydrates, that's another clue to reread the ingredient list.

What should you not worry about? Don't worry about the protein! If you eat a whole-food, plant-based diet, you will naturally get [all the protein you need](#), without having to think about it. Remember, the fewer packaged/labeled foods you eat the better, but if you follow these simple guidelines and find your go-to brands, it will make healthy eating a whole lot easier.

The Bottom Line

When buying packaged foods, don't pay attention to words like *natural*, *wholesome*, and *optimal*—they don't mean anything. Instead, focus on reading the ingredients list and the Nutrition Facts panel. And just remember that the more you practice deciphering product packaging, the easier smart shopping will be.

Three types of potentially misleading packaging claims:

1. Health claims
2. Structure/function claims
3. Nutrient claims

The FDA is the regulatory body that sets the [standards](#) for these claims. However, the FDA's ability to regulate unfounded claims is severely limited, both legally and practically, due to limited resources for investigation and enforcement.

Health and Structure/Function Claims

To most consumers, all three types of claims look pretty similar, particularly the first two. Here are the technical descriptions of both:

- **HEALTH CLAIM:** Includes an *evidence-backed* statement relating a *food or food component* to a *disease or health outcome*. These claims have to be reviewed and evaluated by the FDA prior to use.
- **STRUCTURE/FUNCTION CLAIM:** Describes the effect that a "substance" (rather than a nutrient or food) has in affecting the normal structure or function in the body, without making reference to a disease. No evidence review from the FDA is required; the manufacturer merely has to submit a letter declaring its intent to use the claim and include the disclaimer "This statement has not been evaluated by the FDA" on its packaging. Here are some examples of each kind—can you easily tell them apart?

Verbs like "support," "maintain," and "boost" are often used in structure/function claims.

Health Claims

Lowers cholesterol
Reduces risk of osteoporosis
Reduces risk of urinary tract infections

Structure/Function Claim

Helps maintain normal cholesterol levels
Helps build strong bones
Helps maintain urinary tract health

Nutrient Claims

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The third kind of claim, a [nutrient claim](#), makes a statement about the nutrient content of the food, and for example, may use the words “good” or “excellent.” Use of these two words is based on the daily values (DV) for each nutrient. For instance, a package can claim its contents to be a “good source of calcium” if one serving contains 10 to 19% of the daily value for calcium. An “excellent source” is defined as 20 percent or more of the daily value.

However, we don't recommend trying to organize your diet around meeting recommended levels of particular nutrients. The amount of any particular nutrient that we absorb and metabolize can vary widely from person to person and time to time, based on a multitude of factors, including our need at that moment, and what else we eat at the same time. At best, food labels provide ballpark estimates of nutrient content, given the poor quality assurance, inadequate sample sizes, and lack of evaluation standards common in the industry. Another reason not to get too excited about using the Daily Values is that they were calculated only for adults and haven't actually been updated in decades.

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