



# Food-label reading made simple

*Arm yourself with these rules for your next trip to the supermarket*

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**L**earning how to read a food label is an important skill. Unfortunately, though, labels aren't designed for easy interpretation and contain far more information than the average consumer wants or needs.

From a weight and healthy-eating perspective, here's a quick and easy way to read a food label that won't take you hours or require a PhD in nutrition.

## STEP ONE: Serving sizes

You have to start here because in Canada, serving sizes are not standardized; nor do they reflect real-world portions. I've seen serving sizes listed as one-third of a cookie or 10 potato chips. Make sure that you multiply every label value you're assessing by the number of serving sizes (reported on the label) you plan to eat.

## STEP TWO: Calories

As I'm quick to point out, calories are the currency of weight, and, if you're concerned about yours, calories are certainly something you need to be aware of. Of course, your own recommended levels of daily calories will vary, but if you're a woman, try to eat at least a minimum of 300 calories per meal and 150 calories per snack (400 calories per meal and 200 calories per snack if you're a man). Having less than that may lead to hunger, and hunger always trumps brains when it comes to making dietary decisions.

## STEP THREE: Protein

More is better. Protein is filling, and, if you're full, it's easier to navigate the healthier choices. (We don't crave green, leafy salads when we're hungry.) Per meal, aim for at least 15 grams, and per snack, for at least eight.

## STEP FOUR: Sugar

The World Health Organization recommends that no more than 10% of your total daily calories come from added sugar, but for the sake of ease and time with labels, think less is more. There are four grams of sugar per teaspoon, and simple division will help you to determine how many teaspoons there are in the food you're considering, which, in turn, may help you to visualize why reduction may be worthwhile. Take, for instance, the astounding nine teaspoons of sugar in one glass of Welch's 100% Grape Juice.

## STEP FIVE: Fibre

More is more. Fibre will help with satiety. It will also help delay the speed with which your body processes associated carbohydrates and may be involved in helping to prevent heart disease and colon cancer.

## STEP SIX: Fats

Avoid non-naturally occurring trans fats. (Naturally occurring trans fats are found primarily in grass-fed animals such as cattle.) Man-made trans fats are toxic in any amount.

Saturated fats shouldn't scare you anymore and have been wrongly vilified over the years. The low-fat focus of the last 30 years may have led you to consume more processed carbohydrates, which, in turn, may have increased your overall hunger levels, led to rapid shifts in blood sugar and insulin and put you at greater risk for developing chronic diseases, including obesity and type 2 diabetes. I don't worry about saturated fats in my foods — other than the caloric punch they provide, since fats have more than twice as many calories per gram than either carbohydrates or proteins (9 versus 4).

Unsaturated fats are the healthy fats, which, in turn, may play a role in minimizing your risk of cardiovascular disease. Careful, though, they also contain 120 calories per tablespoon, so while olive oil may be a healthy fat, drizzling it over everything you eat rings up the calories quickly — a tablespoon extra a day for a year may buy you a 12-pound weight gain.

## STEP SEVEN: Sodium


Less is more. Of course, here it's important to point out that only in the neighbourhood of 40% of the population are sodium responders — folks in whom sodium has a directly negative impact on their blood pressure when consumed. Generally, sodium responders are folks who have either pre-existing high blood pressure or heart disease or are elderly.

But even if you don't fall into any of those camps today, it may be wise to establish a low-sodium dietary pattern early in life because at least half of us will one day develop heart disease and, hopefully, all of us will grow old.

## STEP EIGHT: Ingredients

A few things to look for.

- Fewer rather than more ingredients. Certainly once you've cleared five to 10 ingredients, the food you're looking at is more of a chemical Frankenfood than a healthy choice.
- In Canada, whole-wheat breads don't necessarily mean whole-grain breads, so you've got to look for whole-grain, whole-wheat products to ensure that's what you're getting. In general, grains not described as whole specifically, probably aren't.
- Sugar-wise, food manufacturers are permitted to list different sugars separately in the ingredients. Consequently, while sugar may not be listed as the first ingredient, if it's listed as the third, fifth, seventh, ninth, 11th and 12th, that's less than ideal.
- Lastly, look for hydrogenated oils. If you see them, there are trans fats present, even if the nutrition facts panel states that there aren't. In Canada, foods with less than 0.2 grams of trans fats can call themselves trans fat-free, while in the U.S., foods with less than 0.5 grams can do so.

Everything else on a label I'd pretty much ignore. All those % daily value items serve primarily to confuse and, ultimately, are not useful in the day-to-day evaluation of food labels. If you're truly worried about your % DVs, increase your intake of fresh whole foods and decrease your processed boxes and mixes — you'll do just fine. 

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