

# Food Label Helps Consumers Make Healthier Choices

Consumers often compare prices of food items in the grocery store to choose the best value for their money. But comparing items using the food label can help them choose the best value for their health.

The food label identifies a variety of information about a product, such as the ingredients, net weight, and nutrition facts.

"The food label is one of the most valuable tools consumers have," says Barbara Schneeman, Ph.D., Director of the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) Office of Nutrition, Labeling and Dietary Supplements. "The food label gives consumers the power to compare foods quickly and easily so they can judge for themselves which products best fit their dietary needs."

For example, someone with high blood pressure who needs to watch salt (sodium) intake may be faced with five different types of tomato soup on the shelf, says Schneeman. You can quickly and easily compare the sodium content of each product by looking at the part of the label that lists nutrition information (Nutrition Facts Label) to choose the one with the lowest sodium content.

FDA regulations require nutrition information to appear on most foods, and any claims on food products must be truthful and not misleading. In addition, "low sodium," "reduced fat," and "high fiber" must



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While most packaged foods are required by law to carry nutrition labeling, it is voluntary for many raw foods. FDA offers consumers and retailers nutrition information for frequently consumed raw fruits, vegetables, and fish.

meet strict government definitions. FDA has defined other terms used to describe the content of a nutrient, such as "low," "reduced," "high," "free," "lean," "extra lean," "good source," "less," "light," and "more." So a consumer who wants to reduce sodium intake can be assured that the manufacturer of a product claiming to be "low sodium" or "reduced in sodium" has met these definitions.

But you don't have to memorize the

definitions. Just look at the Nutrition Facts Label to compare the claims of different products with similar serving sizes.

## Nutrient Highs and Lows

Most nutrients must be declared on the Nutrition Facts Label as "percent Daily Value" (%DV), which tells the percent of the recommended daily intake in a serving of that product and helps the consumer create a bal-

anced diet. The %DV allows you to see at a glance if a product has a high or low amount of a nutrient. The rule of thumb is 20% DV or more is high and 5% DV or less is low.

Health experts recommend keeping your intake of saturated fat, *trans* fat, and cholesterol as low as possible because these nutrients may increase your risk for heart disease. This is where the %DV on the Nutrition Facts Label can be helpful, says Schneeman. There is no %DV for *trans* fat, but you can use the label to find out whether the saturated fat and cholesterol are high or low, she says. When comparing products, look at the total amount of saturated fat plus *trans* fat to find the one lowest in both of these types of fat.

For beneficial nutrients, like fiber or calcium, you can use the %DV to choose products that contain higher amounts. Research has shown that eating a diet rich in fiber may lower your chances of getting heart disease and some types of cancer. And eating foods containing calcium may help lower your risk of getting the bone-weakening disease, osteoporosis.

### Confusing Claims

The terms “natural,” “healthy,” and “organic” often cause confusion. “Consumers seem to think that ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ imply ‘healthy,’” says Schneeman. “But these terms have different meanings from a regulatory point of view.”

According to FDA policy, “natural” means the product does not contain synthetic or artificial ingredients. “Healthy,” which is defined by regulation, means the product must meet certain criteria that limit the amounts of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium, and require specific minimum amounts of vitamins, minerals, or other beneficial nutrients.

Food labeled “organic” must meet the standards set by the Department of Agriculture (USDA). Organic food differs from conventionally produced food in the way it is grown or produced. But USDA makes no claims

that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food.

For example, says Schneeman, “A premium ice cream could be ‘natural’ or ‘organic’ and still be high in fat or saturated fat, so would not meet the criteria for ‘healthy.’”

### Ask and You May Receive

Most packaged foods are required by law to carry nutrition labeling. This labeling is voluntary for many raw foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and fish. FDA encourages stores that sell raw foods to display or distribute, near these foods, nutrition information to shoppers. To make it easy for retailers, FDA has created colorful posters that can be downloaded and printed from its Web site. The posters show nutrition information for the 20 most frequently consumed raw fruits, vegetables, and fish in the United States.

“If the nutrition information is not displayed for these raw foods, we want consumers to ask, ‘where’s the nutrition information on your fresh products?’” says Camille Brewer, Deputy Director of FDA’s Office of Nutrition, Labeling and Dietary Supplements. Industry responds to consumer demand, says Brewer. “Industry tells us all the time, ‘if consumers ask, we’ll give it to them.’”

FDA also encourages consumers to request nutrition information in full-service or fast-food restaurants. This information would help consumers make healthier choices outside the home, where Americans now spend nearly half of their total food budget, according to the National Restaurant Association and USDA’s Economic Research Service.

Providing nutrition information for restaurant food is voluntary unless a nutrient content claim or a health claim is made for a menu item or meal. A nutrient content claim might be “low in fat,” and a health claim might be “heart healthy.” If such claims are made, the restaurant is required to give customers the appropriate nutri-

tion information for these items when requested. This information does not have to be on the menu or on a menu board that’s clearly visible to the consumer. The restaurant has the option of offering this information in various ways, such as in a brochure.

Many food service establishments have nutrition information for their offerings and will provide the information on the Internet or to customers who request it. [FDA](#)

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### For More Information

Protect Your Health  
Joint FDA/WebMD resource  
[www.webmd.com/fda](http://www.webmd.com/fda)

How to Understand and Use the  
Nutrition Facts Label  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html)

Nutrition Facts Label Brochure  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~acrobat/nutfacts.pdf](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~acrobat/nutfacts.pdf)

A Key to Choosing Healthful Foods  
(English and Spanish)  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fflabel.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fflabel.html)

Make Your Calories Count  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~ear/hwm/labelman.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~ear/hwm/labelman.html)

Downloadable/Printable Posters  
on Nutrition Information for Raw  
Fruits, Vegetables, and Fish  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/nutinfo.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/nutinfo.html)