

Savvy Shopping: How to Read a Food Label

When shopping for foods, we are first attracted to colorful labels featuring delicious looking photos and claims about health and flavor. Statements on labels such as “lite,” “0 grams *trans* fat,” or “reduced calorie” can mislead us into thinking certain foods are good for our diets. But these are just teasers designed to lure us in. For example, a food labeled “sugar free” may not be calorie free, and it could lack fiber, vitamins, minerals, and other healthy nutrients. If you want to know the *real* story about whether a food fits into your plans, you have to read its detailed Nutrition Facts label as well as the list of ingredients!

The Nutrition Facts Label

Nutrition Facts labels help us by:

- Providing valuable information about how a food fits into our diet goals
- Allowing us to compare products and pick the best one for us
- Telling us the serving size of a food and how many servings are in a package
- Telling us how many calories and how much fat, sugars, sugar alcohols, and fiber are in a food

When reading the Nutrition Facts label:

- Note that the information on the Nutrition Facts label (number of calories, grams of fat, grams of sugar, and so on) is **per serving** (*not* per container!), so start by checking the serving size. In the example shown here, the serving size is 1 cup.
- Think about what your portion size is. For example, if you always eat the whole container, you need to multiply the calories/fat/sugar (etc.) by the number of servings per container. Decide whether you can afford to eat this much, or whether you can limit your portion size. In the example shown here, the container provides two servings.

After weight-loss surgery, you will also check the Nutrition Facts to learn:

- **Is the food low calorie?** Low-calorie foods have 40 or fewer calories per serving. (The labeling term “reduced calorie” indicates that the food is lower in calories than the standard version of the food, but it does not necessarily mean that the food is low calorie. Read the Nutrition Facts label to know for sure.)
- **Is the food low in fat (especially saturated fat and *trans* fat)?**
 - Low-fat foods have no more than 3 grams of fat per 3½-ounce serving, or less than 30% of calories from fat.
 - Limit saturated fat to 1 gram or less when selecting a food item or 15% of calories in a main dish.
 - Avoid *trans* fat completely, if possible.
- **Is the food low in sugar?**
 - To prevent dumping syndrome and avoid empty calories, limit sugar to 5 grams per serving (as stated on the food label).
 - If grams of sugar alcohols are listed on the label, these count half as much as sugar toward your sugar limit. (Not all labels list sugar alcohols. If they are listed, they will appear below Sugars in the Nutrition Facts.)
 - For foods that contain lactose, such as milk or yogurt, the tolerable sugar level is typically 12 grams per serving (milk) and 7 grams per serving (yogurt). Look for unsweetened or “no added sugar” milk and yogurt.

Note: Fresh whole fruit (which usually does not have a food label) is slower to leave the pouch and does not tend to promote dumping in moderate amounts.
- **Is the food a good source of fiber?** Fiber helps prevent constipation and can help you feel full longer. Good sources of fiber will have 3 or more grams per serving.
- **If the food is a high-quality protein, how much protein does it have?** Make sure that the proteins you select are high in quality, such as lean meats, chicken and fish, dairy, or whey protein isolate or soy protein isolates.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 cup (228g)	
Servings Per Container about 2	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 250	Calories from Fat 110
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 12g	18%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 3g	
Cholesterol 30mg	10%
Sodium 470mg	20%
Total Carbohydrate 31g	10%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 5g	
Proteins 5g	
Vitamin A	4%
Vitamin C	2%
Calcium	20%
Iron	4%
* 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
Saturated Fat	Less than 20g 25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g
<small>For educational purposes only. This label does not meet the labeling requirements described in 21 CFR 101.9.</small>	

← Information is per *serving* (Not per container!).

← Limit saturated fats and avoid *trans* fats altogether.

← Limit sugars to 5 grams. Sugar alcohols should also be limited.

The Ingredients List

In addition to checking the Nutrition Facts, it's useful to get in the habit of reading the ingredients list. This list tells you what the food is made of, which helps you if you have a food allergy or intolerance or otherwise need to avoid certain food ingredients (such as collagen protein or sorbitol). Ingredients are listed in order by weight (the first ingredient is highest in weight).