

Get the facts on nutrition by reading your food labels

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Want to choose a diet low in cholesterol, sodium and fat? The facts are right there in black and white, on just about every package or can in your pantry. It's called the nutrition facts label.

Thanks to the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, nutrition facts can now be found on the side or back of nearly every package you pick up in the grocery store, and there's a good chance you're paying attention to them. According to a survey released in March 2010 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, most consumers are reading food labels these days and are increasingly aware of the link between nutrition and health. More than half, or 54 percent of U.S. consumers, often read the food label when buying a product for the first time, up from 44 percent in 2002. Most folks say they use the information on the label to see how high or low a particular food is in calories, salt, vitamins and fat.

"The label helps you determine the amounts of nutrients you are consuming, and also helps you to compare one product to another," says Crystal Rasnake, MS, a nutritionist with the Office of Nutrition, Labeling and Dietary Supplements at FDA.

Spot the Block: Tips for kids

Helping your kids learn about food labels is important, because obesity is on the rise. Through its Spot the Block campaign, FDA is introducing 9- to 13-year-olds to nutrition facts labels to help them make healthier food choices.

The site, online at www.spottheblock.com, includes interactive games as well as tips for parents and teachers.



Photos courtesy: iStockphoto. Top photo by David Lewis; center, Tom Englund; bottom, Catherine Yeulet.

"If you use the label when you shop, as you plan your meals, and as you cook each day, it can help you make healthier choices in your diet."

What's on a food label?

Some people think food labels are confusing, but that's because they don't know how to put the information they convey in context, says Rasnake, who offers some tips. Grab a package off your kitchen shelf right now and spend a few minutes with the nutrition label. First, check out the serving size, number of servings in a package and calories. The nutrition facts label is based on a 2,000-calorie diet, but your calorie needs might be different. Nutrient amounts are given for one serving.

Be sure and read carefully, however: Some products — such as a can of soup or a block of Asian noodles — look like they are packaged for a single serving. But you might be surprised to look at the label and learn that a product you have long enjoyed is actually intended for more than one meal. In addition, you could be consuming two or three times more fat, calories and sodium than you think you are.

To judge if the product is right for you, Rasnake says to check out the label's "daily value" column, sometimes abbreviated as "%DV." This information helps you estimate if a food is high or low in a specific nutrient. Also, a really quick way to figure out if a food is low or high in a particular nutrient is to use the "5/20 rule," Rasnake says. If the percent of daily value is 5 percent or less, the food is low in that nutrient. If it is 20 percent and more, it is high in that nutrient.

"You might actually eat more or less than the serving size, but this number gives you a baseline for nutrient content," Rasnake says.

Use the nutrition facts label to



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select foods that are the lowest in saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol. You should also check the sodium content of a product.

In addition to helping you identify the things you should limit in your diet, such as fat and sodium, the label can help you increase nutrients that promote good health and may protect you from disease. Look for nutrients such as vitamins A and C, potassium, calcium and iron, and choose foods with a higher "daily value" for these nutrients.

"Use that '5/20 rule' and compare products to find the ones that are right for you," Rasnake says. "It is also important to use the label to look for foods that are high in dietary fiber, such as beans and whole grains."

And remember: You can use the nutrition facts label not only to help limit those nutrients you want to cut back on, but also to increase the nutrients you need to consume in greater amounts.

Find the facts on fresh foods

Fresh corn on the cob is on sale today and you're stuffing a dozen ears in your cart, but where's the black and white nutrition facts label? Labeling for fresh fruits and vegetables is voluntary, however many retailers provide this information upon request.

For the 20 most popular fresh fruits and vegetables, nutrition information is sometimes displayed in a notebook or printed in handouts in the produce section. Also, many manufacturers and farmers are now voluntarily providing nutrient information on their own products.



American Public Health Association

>> For more tips, visit www.fda.gov/food/labelingnutrition/consumerinformation