

Healthy Eating: Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label¹

Linda B. Bobroff and Karla P. Shelnutt²

Why do we need the Nutrition Facts label?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires that most food packages have the Nutrition Facts label. This label contains information about nutrients in the food to help people make healthier food choices.

Older adults can use the label to choose foods that provide required daily nutrients or fit with a diet plan to manage a disease or health condition. For example, people with hypertension may look for foods that are lower in sodium and high in potassium. People with heart disease may choose foods lower in saturated fat and trans fat. Although the label includes quite a bit of information, these guidelines will help you use the information that you need to make healthy food buying decisions.

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
Serving size	2/3 cup (55g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	230
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 8g	10%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 37g	13%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 235mg	6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Figure 1. FDA released this new format for the Nutrition Facts panel in May 2016, and it has already appeared on some foods. The updated label was scheduled to be required on most food packages by July 2018, but that date has been postponed (FDA, 2017).

Credits: FDA (<http://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/GuidanceDocumentsRegulatoryInformation/LabelingNutrition/ucm385663.htm>)

1. This document is FCS8883, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date October 2009. Revised May 2017. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
2. Linda B. Bobroff, professor; and Karla P. Shelnutt, associate professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Nick T. Place, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.

Start at the Top

The best place to start is with the serving size and servings per container, located at the top of the Nutrition Facts label. Serving sizes of a food may be larger or smaller than what you eat at one sitting. If you eat the whole package, but the serving size on the Nutrition Facts label is only half a package, then you need to double all the numbers on the label to know how much of each nutrient was in the food that you ate (FDA, 2016).

Check the Calories

- The Nutrition Facts label tells you how many calories are in one serving of the food (FDA, 2016). You can get an idea of the relative calorie content of various foods by using this quick guide.
- 40 calories or fewer per serving is low-calorie.
- 100 calories per serving is moderate-calorie.
- 400 calories or more per serving is high-calorie.

Eating more calories than you need over time can lead to unwanted weight gain. On the other hand, not eating enough calories contributes to unintended weight loss and frailty in older adults. It is a good idea to learn how similar foods compare in the number of calories they provide. Using the Nutrition Facts panel to compare various brands of a similar food can help you decide which brand of beans to buy. You might want the one that has the fewest calories or the one that provides the most calories, depending on your calorie needs.

Limit Certain Nutrients

Americans often eat more saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, and sodium than they need. Luckily, these are all listed on the Nutrition Facts label, so you can choose foods lower in these nutrients. Aim to eat less than 100% of the Daily Value (DV) for these nutrients each day (FDA, 2016). For a 2,000-calorie diet you should be getting less than the following amounts on a daily basis. Note that there is no DV for trans fat; the recommendation is to eat as little of it as possible.

These are the maximum amounts to eat per day:

- 20 g saturated fat
- 300 mg cholesterol
- 2,400 mg sodium

Get Plenty of Good Stuff!

Most American diets do not contain enough fiber, vitamin D, potassium, calcium, or iron (FDA, 2016). That is why these nutrients are required to be on the Nutrition Facts label. Aim to get at least 100% of the DV for these nutrients each day. Foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products are great sources of these nutrients. Fruits and vegetables do not come with a Nutrition Facts label when you buy them fresh, but your store may have nutrition information at the point of purchase. You can also check out this website for nutrition information about fruits and vegetables: <http://www.fruitsandveggies-morematters.org/fruit-veggie-nutrition>.



Credits: Fuse

Look at the % Daily Values!

The % DV tells you what percentage of your daily requirement for a nutrient is in one serving of a food. The % DVs are based on a 2,000-calorie diet, but you can use them as a guide even if you need more or fewer calories. For example, if a food has 50% DV for calcium, two servings would provide your total calcium requirement for the day. Of course, we do not need to get 100% of the DV for any nutrient from one food. You can use this guide to decide if a food is a good source of a particular nutrient and to compare it with other similar foods.

- 5% DV or less is low.
- 20% DV or more is high.

You can use the % DV to compare nutrients in different brands of the same kind of food as long as the serving sizes are similar (FDA, 2016).

What about trans fat, protein, and sugars?

Even though these nutrients do not have % DV listed, you still can see how much of these nutrients are in a serving of a food. Experts recommend keeping your intake of trans fats

as low as possible because this type of fat has a negative effect on blood cholesterol and raises risk of heart disease (Brouwer, Wanders, & Katan, 2010).

Older adults need to have enough protein in their diets to stay healthy and avoid muscle loss (Volpi et al., 2012). Go to <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/protein-foods> for a protein intake recommendation based on your individual needs. The website has examples of foods that are great sources of this essential nutrient and ways to include them in your diet.

There is no recommendation for a certain level of sugar intake. The updated nutrition label that is being introduced on foods over the next couple of years shows the total amount of sugar in the food as well as added sugars. Total sugars include added sugars and sugars naturally found in foods like fruits. Read the ingredients list to see which sugars have been added to the food. Common added sugars include syrups, such as high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), maltodextrin, sucrose, dextrose, honey, and fruit juice concentrate. Current dietary guidelines suggest that we limit our intake of added sugars of all types to reduce risk of obesity and diabetes.

Note: The FDA issued the updated Nutrition Facts label for packaged food in 2016. The updated version will go into effect over the next few years. For more information, visit the FDA website at <http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm>.

Where can I get more information?

The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your local UF/IFAS Extension office may have more information or classes for you to attend. Find your local UF/IFAS Extension

office at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>. A registered dietitian (RD) can also provide you with reliable information.

References

Brouwer, I. A., Wanders, A. J., & Katan, M. B. (2010). Effect of animal and industrial trans fatty acids on HDL and LDL cholesterol levels in humans—A quantitative review. *PLoS One*, 5(3), e9434.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2017). Changes to the Nutrition Facts label. Accessed on July 19, 2017. <https://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/GuidanceDocuments-RegulatoryInformation/LabelingNutrition/ucm385663.htm#dates>

U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2016). How to understand and use the Nutrition Facts label. Accessed on May 5, 2017. <http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm>

Volpi, E., Campbell, W.W., Dwyer, J. T., Johnson, M. A., Jensen, G. L., Morley, J. E., & Wolfe, R. R. (2012). Is the optimal level of protein intake for older adults greater than the recommended dietary allowance? *The Journals of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, 68(6), 677–81. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3660117/>