

## FOOD LABELS

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. 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. 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.

Government 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 meet strict government definitions. Terms used to describe the content of a nutrient, such as low reduced high free lean extra lean good source less light and more have been defined. 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 balanced 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. 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." 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. Organic food differs from conventionally produced makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food. For example, 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.

Most packaged foods are required by law to carry nutrition labeling. This labeling is voluntary for many raw foods, such as fruits, vegetables. Industry responds to consumer demand.

We must also encourage consumers to request nutrition information in full-service or fast food restaurants. This information would help consumers make healthier choices outside the home,. 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 nutrition 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.

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