

# Using the Nutrition Facts Label



A How-To Guide for Older Adults



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## Why Nutrition Matters For You

Good nutrition is important throughout your life!

It can help you feel your best and stay strong. It can help reduce the risk of some diseases that are common among older adults. And, if you already have certain health issues, good nutrition can help you manage the symptoms.

Nutrition can sometimes seem complicated. But the good news is that the **Food and Drug Administration** has a simple tool to help you know exactly what you're eating.

It's called the **Nutrition Facts Label**. You will find it on **all packaged foods and beverages**. It serves as your guide for making choices that can affect your long-term health.

This booklet will give you the information you need to start using the Nutrition Facts Label today!

### Good Nutrition Can Help You Avoid or Manage These Common Diseases:

- certain cancers
- type 2 diabetes
- heart disease
- high blood pressure
- obesity
- osteoporosis

For more on nutrition for older adults, visit:  
[www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/Seniors](http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/Seniors)



# At-A-Glance: The Nutrition Facts Label

Understanding what the Nutrition Facts Label includes can help you make **food choices** that are best for your health.

1

<b>Nutrition Facts</b>	
Serving Size 1/4 Cup (113g)	
Servings Per Container 8	
Amount Per Serving	
<b>Calories</b> 100	Calories from Fat 20
% Daily Value*	
<b>Total Fat</b> 2g	<b>3%</b>
Saturated Fat 1.5g	<b>7%</b>
<i>Trans Fat</i> 0g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 10mg	<b>3%</b>
<b>Sodium</b> 460mg	<b>19%</b>
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b> 4g	<b>1%</b>
Dietary Fiber 0g	<b>0%</b>
Sugars 4g	
<b>Protein</b> 16g	
Vitamin A 0%	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 8%	Iron 0%

\* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

2

3

4

5

## 1 Serving Size

This section shows how many servings are in the package, and how big the serving is. Serving sizes are given in familiar measurements, such as “cups” or “pieces.”

Remember: All of the nutrition information on the label is based upon **one serving** of the food.

A package of food often contains more than one serving!

## 2 Amount of Calories

The calories listed are for **one serving** of the food. “Calories from fat” shows how many fat calories there are in **one serving**.

Remember — a product that’s *fat-free* isn’t necessarily *calorie-free*. Read the label!

## 3 Percent (%) Daily Value

This section tells you how the nutrients in one serving of the food contribute to your total daily diet. Use it to choose foods that are high in the nutrients you should get more of, and low in the nutrients you should get less of.

Daily Values are based on a 2,000-calorie diet. However, your nutritional needs will likely depend on how physically active you are. Talk to your healthcare provider to see what calorie level is right for you.

## 4 Limit these Nutrients

Eating too much total fat (especially saturated fat and *trans* fat), cholesterol, or sodium may increase your risk of certain chronic diseases, such as heart disease, some cancers, or high blood pressure.

Try to keep these nutrients as low as possible each day.

## 5 Get Enough of these Nutrients

Americans often don’t get enough dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and potassium in their diets. These nutrients are essential for keeping you feeling strong and healthy.

Eating enough of these nutrients may improve your health and help reduce the risk of some diseases.



# 3 Key Areas of Importance



As you use the Nutrition Facts Label, pay particular attention to Serving Size, Percent Daily Value, and Nutrients.

## Serving Size

The top of the Nutrition Facts Label shows the **serving size** and the **servings per container**. Serving size is the key to the rest of the information on the Nutrition Facts Label.

- The nutrition information about the food – like the calories, sodium, and fiber – is based upon **one serving**.
- If you eat **two servings** of the food, you are eating **double** the calories and getting **twice the amount** of nutrients, both good and bad.
- If you eat **three servings**, that means **three times** the calories and nutrients – and so on.

That is why knowing the serving size is important. It's how you know for sure how many calories and nutrients you are getting.

## Check Serving Size!

It is very common for a food package to contain more than one serving. One bottled soft drink or a small bag of chips can actually contain two or more servings!

If you eat two servings . . .

Serving Size 1/4 Cup (113g)	
Servings Per Container 8	
<b>Amount Per Serving</b>	
<b>Calories</b> 100	Calories from Fat 20

x2

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Sugars 4g	
<b>Protein</b> 16g	
Vitamin A 0%	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 8%	Iron 0%

\* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

## Percent Daily Value (%DV)

The %DV is a general guide to help you link nutrients in **one serving** of food to their contribution to your **total daily diet**. It can help you determine if a food is high or low in a nutrient: 5% or less is low, 20% or more is high.

You can also use the %DV to make dietary trade-offs with other foods throughout the day.

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\* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

## %DV: Quick Tips

You can tell if a food is high or low in a particular nutrient by taking a quick look at the %DV.

- If it has **5% percent** of the Daily Value or less, it is **low** in that nutrient.
- If it has **20% or more**, it is **high** in that nutrient.

This can be good or bad, depending on if it is a nutrient you want more of or less of.

This can be good for nutrients like fiber (a nutrient to get more of) . . . but not so good for something like saturated fat (a nutrient to get less of).

## Using %DV

- Once you are familiar with %DV, you can use it to compare foods and decide which is the better choice for you. Be sure to check for the particular nutrients you want more of or less of.
- Using %DV information can also help you “balance things out” for the day.
  - *For example:* If you ate a favorite food at lunch that was high in sodium, a “nutrient to get less of,” you would then try to choose foods for dinner that are lower in sodium.

## Nutrients

A nutrient is an ingredient in a food that provides nourishment. Nutrients are essential for life and to keep your body functioning properly.



### Nutrients To Get **MORE** Of:

There are some nutrients that are especially important for your health. You should *try to get adequate amounts* of these each day. They are:

- calcium
- vitamin A
- dietary fiber
- vitamin C
- potassium\*

\* *Note:* The listing of potassium is optional on the Nutrition Facts Label.



### Nutrients To Get **LESS** Of:

There are other nutrients that are important, but that you should *eat in moderate amounts*. They can increase your risk of certain diseases.

They are:

- Total fat (especially saturated fat)
- Cholesterol
- Sodium



# Your Guide to a Healthy Diet

The Nutrition Facts Label can help you make choices for **overall health**. But some nutrients can also affect certain health **conditions and diseases**.

Use this chapter as a guide for those nutrients that could impact your own health. Each nutrient section discusses:

- What the nutrient is
- What it can mean for your health
- Label-reading tips

Watch for “nutrients to get less of” (the ones that you should try to limit), and “nutrients to get more of” (the ones that are very important to be sure to get enough of).

You also might want to talk to your healthcare provider about which nutrients you should track closely for your continued health. And remember – the **Nutrition Facts Label** is a tool that is available to you on every packaged food and beverage!

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Test your Nutrition Facts Label knowledge with **Label Man**, FDA's online label-reading tool!

[www.fda.gov/LabelMan](http://www.fda.gov/LabelMan)

On the following pages, you'll find specific information about certain nutrients.

Some are **nutrients to**  **get less of;**

others are **nutrients to**  **get more of.**

All of them can have an impact on your **long-term health**.

In addition, here is an example of how the Nutrition Facts Label can guide you in making good decisions for long-term health and nutrition.

**Example**

**Heart disease** is the number one cause of death in the U.S. today. You can use the Nutrition Facts Label to compare foods and decide which ones fit with a diet that may help reduce the risk of heart disease. Choose foods that have **fewer calories per serving** and a **lower %DV** of these “nutrients to get less of”:

- Total fat
- Saturated fat
- Cholesterol
- Sodium

To lower your risk of heart disease, it is also recommended that you eat *more* fiber.

**Dietary Salt/Sodium**



**What It Is:**

Salt is a crystal-like compound that is used to flavor and preserve food. The words “salt” and “sodium” are often used interchangeably. Salt is listed as “sodium” on the Nutrition Facts Label.

**What You Should Know:**

A small amount of sodium is needed to help certain organs and fluids work properly. But most people eat too much of it – and they may not even know it! That’s because many packaged foods have a high amount of sodium, even when they don’t taste “salty.” Plus, when you add salt to food, you’re adding *more* sodium.

Sodium has been linked to high blood pressure. In fact, eating less sodium can often help **lower blood pressure** . . . which in turn can help **reduce the risk of heart disease**.

And since blood pressure normally rises with age, limiting your sodium intake becomes even more important each year.



**Salt/Sodium**

- Read the label to see how much sodium is in the food you are choosing.
  - 5% DV or less is *low* in sodium
  - 20% DV or more is *high* in sodium.
- When you are deciding between two foods, compare the amount of sodium. Look for cereals, crackers, pasta sauces, canned vegetables, and other packaged foods that are lower in sodium.

# Fiber



## What It Is:

Fiber, or “dietary fiber,” is sometimes called “roughage.” It’s the part of food that can’t be broken down during digestion. So because it moves through your digestive system “undigested,” it plays an important role in keeping your system moving and “in working order.”

## What You Should Know:

Fiber is a “nutrient to get more of.” In addition to aiding in digestion, fiber has a number of other health-related benefits. These benefits are *especially* effective when you have a **high fiber diet** that is also **low in saturated fat, cholesterol, trans fat, added sugars, salt, and alcohol**.

- Eating a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and high in fruits, vegetables, and grain products that contain some types of dietary fiber, particularly soluble fiber, may help lower your cholesterol and reduce your chances of getting **heart disease**, a disease associated with many factors.
- Healthful diets that are low in fat *and* rich in fruits and vegetables that contain fiber may reduce the risk of **some types of cancer**, including colon cancer, a disease associated with many factors. In addition, such healthful diets are also associated with a reduced risk of **type 2 diabetes**.



# Fiber

- Fiber also aids in the regularity of bowel movements and preventing constipation. It may help reduce the risk of **diverticulosis**, a common condition in which small pouches form in the colon wall. This condition often has few or no symptoms; people who already have diverticulosis and *do* have symptoms often find that increased fiber consumption can reduce these symptoms. It’s also important to note that if the pouches caused by diverticulosis rupture and become infected, it results in a more severe condition called **diverticulitis**.

## Soluble v. Insoluble Fiber:

### Where To Get It, and What It Does

Fiber comes in two forms — insoluble and soluble. Most plant foods contain some of each kind.

- **Insoluble fiber** is mostly found in whole-grain products, such as wheat bran cereal, vegetables and fruit. It provides “bulk” for stool formation and helps wastes move quickly through your colon.
- **Soluble fiber** is found in peas, beans, many vegetables and fruits, oat bran, whole grains, barley, cereals, seeds, rice, and some pasta, crackers, and other bakery products. It slows the digestion of carbohydrates, and can help stabilize blood sugar if you have diabetes. In addition, it helps lower “bad cholesterol.” This, in turn, reduces the risk of heart disease.

Check the **Nutrition Facts Label** to see which foods have a higher %DV of fiber.





### Label Reading Tips

#### Fiber

- **Read food labels.** The Nutrition Facts Label tells you the amount of dietary fiber in each serving, as well as the %DV of fiber that food contains.

When comparing the amount of fiber in food, remember:

- 5% DV or less is *low* in fiber
- 20% DV or more is *high* in fiber

The label won't indicate whether fiber is "insoluble" or "soluble," so it's best to try to get some of both. (See information on previous page)

- **Compare foods and choose the ones with higher fiber.** Look for and compare labels on whole-grain products such as bulgur, brown rice, whole wheat couscous or kasha and whole-grain breads, cereals and pasta. In addition, compare different styles/types of canned or frozen beans and fruit.

#### What It Is:

Fat, or "dietary fat," is a nutrient that is a major source of energy for the body. It also helps you absorb certain important vitamins. As a food ingredient, fat provides taste, consistency, and helps you feel full.

#### What You Should Know:

Eating too much fat can lead to a wide range of health challenges. The total amount and type of fat can contribute to and/or increase the risk of:

- heart disease
- high cholesterol
- increased risk of many cancers (including colon-rectum cancer)
- obesity
- high blood pressure
- type 2 diabetes

It is important to know that there are **different types of dietary fat**. Some have health benefits when eaten in small quantities, but others do not.

## Unsaturate





**“Good” Fat:** unsaturated fats (monounsaturated and polyunsaturated)

- These are healthful if eaten in moderation. In fact, small amounts can even help **lower cholesterol levels!**
- *Best Sources:* plant-based oils (sunflower, corn, soybean, cottonseed, and safflower), olive, canola and peanut oils, nuts, and soft margarines (liquid, tub or spray).

**“Undesirable” Fat:** saturated and *trans* fats. These can raise cholesterol levels in the blood – which in turn can contribute to heart disease.

- *Common Sources:* meat, poultry, fish, butter, ice cream, cheese, coconut and palm kernel oils, solid shortenings, and hard margarines.
- Meat (including chicken and turkey) and fish supply protein, B vitamins, and iron. When selecting and preparing meat, poultry, fish and milk or milk products, choose those that are lean, low-fat, or fat-free. Doing this, along with removing the skin from fish and poultry, are good strategies for limiting “undesirable” fat from your diet. In addition, dry beans, which can be used as a meat substitute, are a good source of protein and are non-fat.

## Understanding *Trans* Fat

*Trans* fat is one of the newest additions to the Nutrition Facts Label, so you may be hearing more about it. Here’s what you need to know:

- Most *trans* fat is made when manufacturers “hydrogenize” liquid oils, turning them into solid fats, like shortening or some margarines. *Trans* fat is commonly found in crackers, cookies, snack foods, and other foods made with or fried in these solid oils.
- *Trans* fat, like saturated fat and cholesterol, **raises your LDL (bad) cholesterol** and can increase your risk of coronary heart disease.

## Trans Fat On the Label

There is no recommended total daily value for *trans* fat, so you won’t find the %DV of *trans* fat on a food’s Nutrition Facts Label. However, you can still use the label to see if a food contains *trans* fat and to compare two foods by checking to see if **grams** of *trans* fat are listed. If there is anything other than 0 grams listed, then the food contains *trans* fat.

Because it is extremely difficult to eat a diet that is completely *trans* fat-free without decreasing other nutrient intakes, just aim to keep your intake of *trans* fat as low as possible.

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Amount Per Serving	
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% Daily Value*	
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Saturated Fat 1.5g	<b>7%</b>
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Sugars 4g	
<b>Protein</b> 16g	
Vitamin A 0%	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 8%	Iron 0%

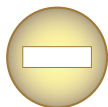
\* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.



### Total Fat

- When comparing foods, check the Nutrition Facts Label and choose the food with the lower %DV of total fat and saturated fat, and low or no grams of *trans* fat.
  - 5% DV or less of total fat is *low*
  - 20% DV or more of total fat is *high*
- When choosing foods that are labeled “fat-free” and “low-fat,” be aware that *fat-free doesn’t mean calorie-free*. Sometimes, to make a food tastier, extra sugars are added, which adds extra calories. Be sure to check the calories per serving.

# Cholesterol



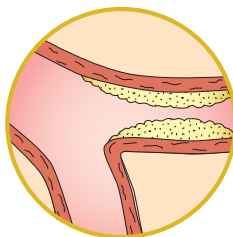
## What It Is:

Cholesterol is a crystal-like substance carried through the bloodstream by lipoproteins – the “transporters” of fat. Cholesterol is required for certain important body functions, like digesting dietary fats, making hormones, and building cell walls.

Cholesterol is found in animal-based foods, like meats and dairy products.

## What You Should Know:

Too much cholesterol in the bloodstream can damage arteries, especially the ones that supply blood to the heart. It can build up in blood vessel linings. This is called **atherosclerosis**, and it can lead to heart attacks and stroke.



However, it's important to know that not all cholesterol is bad. There are **two kinds of cholesterol** found in the bloodstream. How much you have of each is what determines your risk of heart disease.



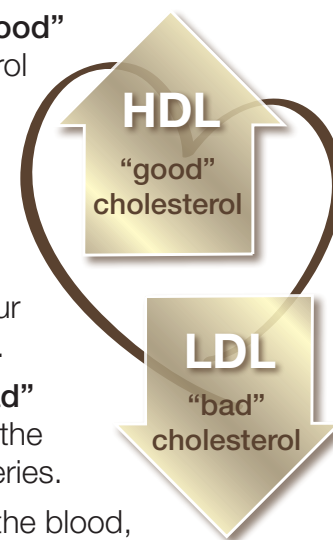
# Cholesterol

**High-density lipoprotein (HDL):** This “good” cholesterol is the form in which cholesterol travels *back to the liver*, where it can be eliminated.

- HDL helps prevent cholesterol buildup in blood vessels. A higher level of this cholesterol is better. Low HDL levels increase heart disease risk. Discuss your HDL level with your healthcare provider.

**Low-density lipoprotein (LDL):** This “bad” cholesterol is carried *into the blood*. It is the main cause of harmful fatty buildup in arteries.

- The higher the LDL cholesterol level in the blood, the greater the heart disease risk. So, a lower level of this cholesterol is better.



## Label Reading Tips

### Cholesterol

- Cholesterol is a “nutrient to get less of.” When comparing foods, look at the Nutrition Facts Label, and choose the food with the lower %DV of cholesterol. Be sure not to go above 100% DV for the day.
  - 5% DV or less of cholesterol is *low*
  - 20% DV or more of cholesterol is *high*
- One of the primary ways LDL (“bad”) cholesterol levels can become too high in the blood is by eating too much saturated fat and cholesterol. **Saturated fat raises LDL levels more than anything else in the diet.**

# Calcium



## What It Is:

Calcium is a mineral that has a lot of uses in the body, but it is best known for its role in building healthy bones and teeth.

## What You Should Know:

Lack of calcium causes **osteoporosis**, which is the primary cause of hip fractures. In fact, the word “osteoporosis” means “porous bones.” It causes progressive bone loss as you age, and makes bones fragile – so that they can break easily. It’s extremely important (especially for women) to get enough calcium throughout your life, especially after menopause. Women are at much higher risk for osteoporosis, but men can get it too.

### A Note About Vitamin D

For calcium to be properly absorbed by the body, you also need to get enough vitamin D. Many milk products and cereals are fortified with vitamin D; also, vitamin D is produced by the body when exposed to sunlight.

If you aren’t exposed to outdoor sunlight on a regular basis, ask your healthcare provider whether you should take vitamin D supplements.

# Calcium



It’s true that many dairy products, which contain high levels of calcium, are relatively high in fat and calories. But keep in mind that **fat-free or low-fat types of milk products** are excellent calcium sources. Nutritionists recommend that you try to get most of your calcium from calcium-rich foods, rather than from calcium supplements. The Nutrition Facts Label can help you make good high-calcium choices.

Other good sources of calcium are:

- canned salmon (with bones, which are edible)
- calcium-fortified soy beverages
- tofu (soybean curd that is “calcium-processed”)
- certain vegetables (for example, dark leafy greens such as collards and turnip greens)
- legumes (blackeyed peas and white beans)
- calcium-fortified grain products
- calcium-fortified juice



## Calcium

- Read the label to see how much calcium is in the food you are choosing.
  - 5% DV or less is *low* in calcium
  - 20% DV or more is *high* in calcium
- Select foods that are high in calcium as often as possible.

## Glossary of Key Nutrition Label Terms

**Calcium:** a mineral that builds and maintains strong bones. Calcium helps prevent osteoporosis.

**Calories:** the energy provided by food/nutrients. On the label, calories shown are for *one serving*.

**Calories from Fat:** Fat calories shown on the label are for *one serving*.

**Cholesterol:** a necessary nutrient from animal-based foods that is carried in the bloodstream. LDL cholesterol is “bad” and HDL cholesterol is “good.”

**Daily Value:** the amount of certain nutrients that most people need each day.

**Nutrient:** an ingredient in a food that provides nourishment or nutritional benefit.

**Nutrition Facts Label:** the black-and-white box found on food and beverage packages.

**Percent Daily Value (%DV):** the percentage of a nutrient found in one serving of food, based on the established standard of 2000 calories per day.

**Saturated Fat:** a type of fat that is solid at room temperature. It is usually animal-based. This type of fat is associated with certain health risks.

**Sodium:** dietary salt that is important in the diet. However, too much sodium can lead to high blood pressure and risk of heart disease.

**Total Fat:** the combined fats that provide energy to the body. Some types of fat are healthier than others.

**Trans Fat:** a type of fat that is created when liquid fat is turned into solid fat during manufacturing. *Trans* fat has no daily value, and should be replaced with unsaturated fat in your diet whenever possible.

**Unsaturated Fat:** a type of fat that is liquid at room temperature; can be plant-based or animal-based. These are usually “good fats.”

The web links provided in this booklet were current at time of publication. In the event that they change, please visit [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov) and search by topic, such as “Seniors” or “Labelman.”



Older Adults  
and the  
**Nutrition Facts Label**

