

What's in a LABEL?

by rhea maze

You don't need a nutrition degree to be a label-savvy, health-conscious consumer. A few simple tricks can help you quickly zero in on the best food product choices.

“**Serving sizes** are not standardized very well so it can be confusing for people,” says Michelle Milholland, R.D. and assistant director at Colorado State University’s Kendall Anderson Nutrition Center. “Some containers are single-serve while others may include multiple servings—even when the container is fairly small. You might have to multiply everything on the label two or three times to see what you’re actually getting.”

Used in some processed foods, **trans fats** have no health benefits, raise ‘bad’ cholesterol levels and are the worst kind of fat for your heart. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently made a preliminary determination that heart-clogging trans fats are not generally recognized as safe for use in food, which could result in them being phased out. Until then, avoid products containing hydrogenated or partially-hydrogenated oils. “As long as a product has less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving, the label can say 0 grams trans fat,” Milholland says. “But you want as little of this as possible so be sure to read the ingredients.”

Mono and polyunsaturated **fats** are healthy and contain beneficial omega-3 fatty acids. “Reduced-fat products can have the same amount of calories but simply include sugar and sodium while cutting out some of the healthy fats,” Milholland says. “I will almost always choose something simpler, which might be higher in fat, over a low-fat product with a lot of ingredients.”

Look for at least three grams of **fiber** per serving in any grain product and the word ‘whole’ rather than ‘enriched’ on the ingredient list. Enriched grains lack the fiber, nutrients and healthy fats you get with whole grains.

Americans typically don’t get enough of the **nutrients** calcium, iron or vitamins A and C—the best sources of which are fresh foods without labels.

Amount Per Serving		% Daily Value *	
Calories 170		Calories from Fat 50	
Total Fat 6g			9%
Saturated Fat 4g			19%
Trans Fat 0g			
Polyunsaturated Fat 0.5g			
Monounsaturated Fat 1g			
Cholesterol 13mg			4%
Sodium 83mg			3%
Total Carbohydrate 33g			11%
Dietary Fiber 4g			16%
Sugar 25g			
Protein 3g			
Vitamin A 110%	•	Vitamin C 2%	
Calcium 10%	•	Iron 3%	

*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
Sat 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

Calories per gram:
Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4

Try to balance how many **calories** you eat with how much your body actually uses and pay attention to where most of the calories come from—high-calorie foods rich in beneficial nutrients are often worth it.

The **daily value** percentages listed on labels are for people who eat 2,000-2,500 calories per day. Sources considered ‘high in’ certain nutrients are those that provide 20% or more of the daily value per serving. Use the daily value to compare products, making sure the serving sizes are similar, so you can see which brands are higher or lower in nutrients.

Stay below 100% of daily fat, **cholesterol** and **sodium**. “Sodium recommendations for healthy adults are about the equivalent of a teaspoon of table salt or less,” Milholland says. “It’s something most of us eat far too much of—and typically, high-sodium products are not very high in nutrients.”

Ingredients are listed by volume so if **sugar** is the first or second one, you might want to put it back. But beware of the many different terms for it; syrups, sweeteners and words ending in ‘ose’ all mean sugar. “Marketing can be so deceptive, especially with things like cereal,” Milholland says. “Sugar could be the second or third ingredient, but then several other types of sugar might be listed too.”

INGREDIENTS: ENRICHED FLOUR (WHEAT FLOUR, NIACIN, REDUCED IRON, VITAMIN B₁ [THIAMIN MONONITRATE], VITAMIN B₂ [RIBOFLAVIN], FOLIC ACID), CORN SYRUP, HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP, DEXTROSE, SOYBEAN AND PALM OIL (WITH TBHQ FOR FRESHNESS), SUGAR, CRACKER MEAL, CONTAINS TWO PERCENT OR LESS OF WHEAT STARCH, SALT, DRIED BLUEBERRIES, DRIED GRAPES, DRIED APPLES, LEAVENING (BAKING SODA, SODIUM ACID PYROPHOSPHATE, MONOCALCIUM PHOSPHATE), CITRIC ACID, MILLED CORN, GELATIN, SOYBEAN OIL, MODIFIED CORN STARCH, MODIFIED WHEAT STARCH, SOY LECITHIN, XANTHAN GUM, CARAMEL COLOR, RED 40, VITAMIN A PALMITATE, NIACINAMIDE, REDUCED IRON, NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL FLAVORS, BLUE 2, BLUE 1, VITAMIN B₆ (PYRIDOXINE HYDROCHLORIDE), SALT, ADDED, TURMERIC EXTRACT, VITAMIN B₂ (RIBOFLAVIN), VITAMIN B₁ (THIAMIN HYDROCHLORIDE).

Ingredients:
Durum whole wheat semolina, parsley, dehydrated vegetables (onion, garlic), lemon powder, salt, spearmint, coriander, canola oil, pepper.

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The fewer **ingredients**, the better. “I try to avoid all unpronounceable ingredients,” Milholland says. “One of the most challenging things about eating with fewer ingredients is that it takes some planning—but if you’re trying to make positive dietary changes, that is one of the best strategies you can use.”

“Go to the store when you have some time to figure out which choices are best for the products you buy most often,” Milholland says. “This will make it easier and faster to make informed decisions next time you are shopping in a hurry.”