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DE-MYSTIFYING FOOD LABELS

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Healthy Living
With Dr. Jenn



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to your guide to understanding food labels.

Have you ever found yourself lost in the supermarket aisle, staring at a food label and wondering what it all means?

Believe it or not I have been stumped myself. As a physician, I thought I had a good understanding of food labels but I have been fooled myself. I have purchased things that I thought were 'healthy' when in fact they were filled with artificial ingredients. Labels are more complex and manufacturers are becoming more creative in their methods to attract us.

Many times the food labels are misleading. For example, things that are labeled as 'gluten free' are full of unhealthy gums and fillers and things that are labeled as 'low fat' are filled with sugar. You think you are getting something healthy but many times these things are sabotaging your health goals or your attempt to nourish your family.

I now know that the things that are most nutritious come without a food label. It is unrealistic though with our busy lives to always make everything from scratch. The goal of this book is to demystify food labels and give you the tools to make better choices when you shop.



CHAPTER 1: THE BASICS OF FOOD LABELS

Understanding food labels can seem like a daunting task with all the numbers, percentages, and scientific terms. However, once you break it down, it's not as complicated as it seems. This chapter aims to introduce you to the basics of food labels, including serving size, calories, and daily values.

SERVING SIZE

The serving size is listed at the top of the nutrition facts label. This can be misleading because sometimes things that look like a single serving are not. It is really important to check how the manufacturer is defining the serving size so you are not misled. Manufacturers will make adjustments to make it seem like there are fewer calories than there are. The serving size is used to calculate the number of calories and other nutrients on the label. It's crucial to understand that if you consume more than the listed serving size, you will be getting more of everything on the label, including calories, fats, sugars, and other nutrients.

CALORIES

Calories provide a measure of how much energy you get from a serving of this food. Many Americans consume more calories than they need without meeting recommended intakes for a number of nutrients.

Generally, a product with 40 calories per serving is considered low in calories, 100 calories per serving is moderate, and 400 calories or more per serving is high. But remember, this is based on a 2,000 calorie diet, which may not be appropriate for everyone.

A side note, the quality of the calories is just as important as the number when you are talking about weight loss or gain.

% DAILY VALUE

The % Daily Value (DV) tells you the percentage of each nutrient in a single serving, in terms of the daily recommended amount. As a guide, if you want to consume less of a nutrient (such as saturated fat or sodium), choose foods with a lower % DV – 5 percent or less. If you want to consume more of a nutrient (such as fiber), seek foods with a higher % DV – 20 percent or more.

Keep in mind, however, that these values are based on a 2,000 calorie daily diet – your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

To sum up, understanding food labels is a crucial step in making healthier food choices. It allows you to quickly compare food options, understand what is included in your food, and make dietary decisions according to your health needs. In the next chapter, we will delve into understanding the ingredients list found on food packages.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size oz.

Serving Per Container

Amount Per Serving:

Calories	Calories From Fat	% Daily value*
Total Fat		%
Saturated Fat		%
Trans Fat		
Cholesterol		%
Sodium		%
Total Carbohydrate		%
Dietary Fiber		%
Sugars		
Protein		

*Percent Daily values are based on a 2000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.



CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING INGREDIENTS LISTS

The ingredients list on a food package is one of the most valuable tools we have as consumers. It allows us to see exactly what's in the food we're eating. However, it can sometimes feel like you need a degree in chemistry to understand it! This chapter aims to demystify the ingredients list and empower you to make informed food choices.

ORDER OF INGREDIENTS

Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight. This means that the first ingredient listed contributes the most to the weight of the food, while the last ingredient contributes the least. This rule can help you understand the main components of your food. For instance, if sugar is listed as the first ingredient, you know that the product is high in sugar.

UNDERSTANDING UNHEALTHY INGREDIENTS

Unfortunately, many unhealthy ingredients hide behind scientific or unfamiliar names. Here are a few to watch out for:

- **Sugars:** Look out for terms like sucrose, glucose, fructose, maltose, dextrose, and high fructose corn syrup. These are all different types of sugars.
- **Fats:** Saturated fats and trans fats are the unhealthy ones. They may be listed as partially hydrogenated oil, palm oil, or animal fats.
- **Sodium:** Sodium is another word for salt. High sodium intake can lead to high blood pressure and other health problems.
- **Additives and preservatives:** These include artificial colors (like Red #40), artificial flavors, monosodium glutamate (MSG), and sodium benzoate. Some people may be sensitive to these additives or may wish to avoid them for other reasons.

RECOGNIZING HEALTHY INGREDIENTS

On the other hand, some ingredients are a sign that the product is a healthy choice. Here are a few:

- **Whole grains:** Look for terms like whole wheat, brown rice, oatmeal, whole grain corn, and whole oats.
- **Healthy fats:** These include monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats. They may be listed as canola oil, olive oil, avocado oil, flaxseed, and chia seeds.
- **Natural sugars:** These include honey, maple syrup, and agave nectar. While these are still sugars and should be limited, they are generally considered healthier than refined sugar.

In conclusion, understanding the ingredients list is crucial for making informed food choices. Look for products with short, understandable ingredients lists with healthy components making up the bulk of the product. In the next chapter, we'll delve into nutrient facts and how to interpret them.



CHAPTER 3: NUTRIENT FACTS

After understanding the serving size and ingredients list, the next important section on a food label is the nutrient facts. This part of the label provides detailed information about the nutrient content of the food. Let's break down what each section means.

TOTAL FAT

This includes all types of fat – saturated, unsaturated, and trans fat. While our bodies need fat for energy and to absorb vitamins, not all fats are created equal. Saturated and trans fats can raise your cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease. Unsaturated fats, on the other hand, can be beneficial when eaten in moderation. The goal should be less than 20% of calories from fat.

CHOLESTEROL

Dietary cholesterol has a direct effect on cholesterol levels. Generally, consumption of high cholesterol foods should be limited or avoided completely especially if you have high cholesterol or have risk factors

SODIUM

Sodium is necessary for body functions like nerve transmission and maintaining fluid balance. However, too much sodium can lead to high blood pressure. The %DV guideline suggests no more than 2,300 mg of sodium per day. A good rule is to keep the mg of sodium per serving at or below the number of calories per serving.

TOTAL CARBOHYDRATE

This includes sugars, dietary fiber, and other carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are the body's main source of energy. However, it's important to focus on healthy sources of carbohydrates such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and avoid refined carbohydrates like enriched wheat flour, enriched bleached flour or all purpose flour.

DIETARY FIBER

Fiber can help you feel full, aid in digestion, help control blood sugar, and reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering cholesterol levels. Aim to get most of your fiber from whole foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.

SUGAR

This includes both naturally occurring sugars (like those in fruit and milk) and added sugars. Added sugars contribute calories but no nutrients and consuming too much can lead to weight gain and other health problems. Many times added sugars are hidden. Look for ingredients like corn syrup, brown rice syrup, fructose, evaporated cane sugar, high fructose corn syrup.

PROTEIN

Protein is essential for building and repairing tissues, making hormones, and supporting immune function. While it's important to get enough protein, most Americans get more than they need.

VITAMINS AND MINERALS

The label also includes information about some key vitamins and minerals. These are nutrients that many people don't get enough of.

In conclusion, understanding nutrient facts is crucial for maintaining a balanced diet. It allows you to ensure you're getting the nutrients you need, while avoiding those you don't. In the next chapter, we'll explore special labels and claims and what they really mean.



CHAPTER 4: SPECIAL LABELS AND CLAIMS

Special labels and claims can be found on food packaging, often used to highlight certain aspects of the product. However, these claims can sometimes be misleading or confusing. In this chapter, we'll explore some common food claims and what they actually mean.

"NATURAL"

While it may seem reassuring to see "natural" on a label, this term is not strictly regulated by the FDA. It generally means that the product doesn't contain artificial ingredients or preservatives, but it doesn't guarantee the product is healthy or organic.

"ORGANIC"

This term is strictly regulated by the USDA. Organic foods must be grown without the use of synthetic pesticides, bioengineered genes (GMOs), petroleum-based fertilizers, and sewage sludge-based fertilizers.

"NON-GMO"

This label indicates that a product does not contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs). However, it's important to note that the majority of GMO crops grown in the US are used for animal feed or for producing processed food ingredients like corn syrup and soy lecithin, so it's less likely to be a concern in whole foods

"FREE-RANGE" OR "CAGE-FREE"

These terms are often seen on egg cartons. "Cage-free" means that the hens were not raised in caged housing systems, but it doesn't necessarily mean they had access to the outdoors. "Free-range" means that the hens had some access to the outdoors, although the amount, duration, and quality of outdoor access is not specified.

"GLUTEN-FREE"

This label means that the food does not contain gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley. This is an important label for those with celiac disease or a gluten intolerance. An important note, this does not necessarily mean that these foods are healthy. It is important to check the ingredients list for added sugars and processed grains.

"LOW-FAT", "REDUCED FAT", OR "FAT-FREE"

These labels indicate that a product has less fat than the regular version. However, they don't mean the product is necessarily healthy, as it could still be high in sugar or calories.

In conclusion, while special labels and claims can provide useful information about food products, they should not be the sole determinant of whether a food is healthy or not. Always read the nutrition facts label and ingredients list to make an informed decision. In the next chapter, we'll discuss how to use all this information to make healthier food choices.





CHAPTER 5:

MAKING HEALTHIER FOOD CHOICES

Now that we've unpacked the key components of food labels, it's time to put that knowledge into action. Here are some practical tips for making healthier food choices.

PRIORITIZE WHOLE FOODS

Whole foods like fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains are naturally nutrient-dense and low in added sugars and unhealthy fats. They also often don't come with a nutrition label, which can make things simpler!

LIMIT ADDED SUGARS

While our bodies need sugar for energy, too much added sugar can lead to weight gain and other health problems. Aim to limit your intake of added sugars, and when you do choose a product with added sugars, make sure it's not one of the first ingredients on the list.

CHOOSE HEALTHY FATS

Remember that not all fats are bad. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats can be beneficial for your heart and brain. Look for these healthy fats in foods like avocados, nuts, seeds, and fatty fish.

WATCH YOUR SODIUM INTAKE

Too much sodium can increase your risk of high blood pressure. Try to choose foods with less than 140 mg of sodium per serving, and avoid foods with more than 400 mg per serving.

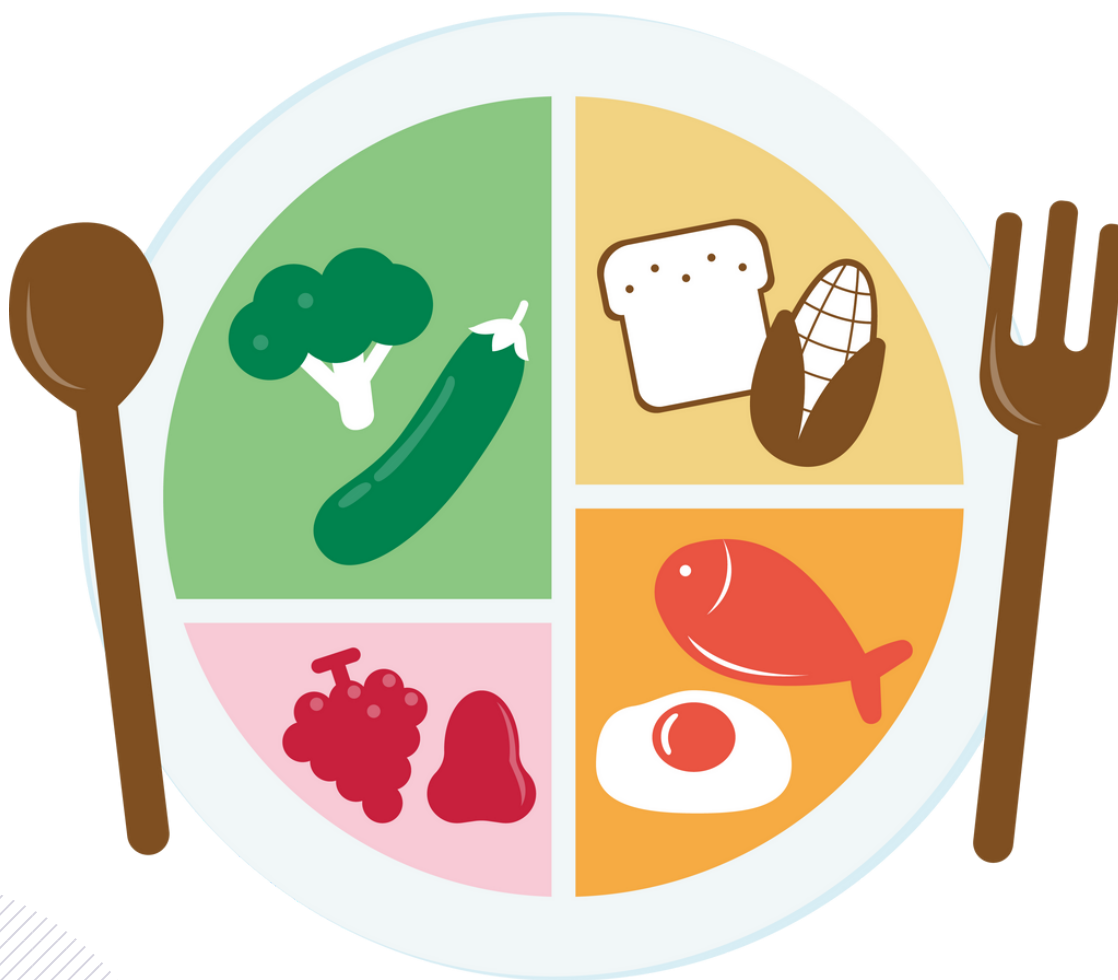
PAY ATTENTION TO PORTION SIZES

Even healthy foods can contribute to weight gain if you eat too much of them. Use the serving size information on food labels to help you determine how much to eat.

BE SKEPTICAL OF HEALTH CLAIMS

Don't let health claims on food packages fool you. Just because a food is labeled as "natural," "organic," or "low-fat" doesn't necessarily mean it's healthy. Always read the nutrition facts label and ingredients list to make an informed decision.

Making healthier food choices doesn't have to be complicated. By understanding food labels and using the information they provide, you can make informed decisions that support your health and wellness goals. In the final chapter, we'll discuss how to maintain these healthy habits in the long term.





CHAPTER 6:

MAINTAINING HEALTHY HABITS FOR THE LONG TERM

Once you've started making healthier food choices, the next challenge is to maintain these habits in the long term. It's not just about a temporary diet or quick fix, but about creating a sustainable lifestyle. Here are some tips to help you keep up your healthy eating habits:

PLAN YOUR MEALS

Planning your meals ahead of time can help ensure that you have healthy options available and can prevent you from reaching for unhealthy snacks when you're hungry. Try to include a variety of foods to ensure you're getting a wide range of nutrients.

COOK AT HOME

Cooking at home allows you to control what goes into your food. You can choose fresh, whole ingredients and avoid added sugars, unhealthy fats, and excessive sodium.

STAY HYDRATED

Drinking enough water is essential for overall health and can also help control hunger and maintain a healthy weight.

PRACTICE MINDFUL EATING

Pay attention to your hunger and fullness cues. Eat slowly and savor your food. This can help you enjoy your food more and prevent overeating.

REGULAR EXERCISE

Regular physical activity is crucial for maintaining a healthy weight and overall health. Try to incorporate both cardio exercises and strength training into your routine.

GET ENOUGH SLEEP

Lack of sleep can interfere with your body's hunger hormones and can lead to overeating and weight gain. Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep per night.

KEEP LEARNING

Nutrition science is always evolving. Stay informed about the latest research and be willing to adjust your eating habits as needed.



In conclusion, maintaining healthy eating habits is a lifelong journey. It's not always easy, but the benefits to your health and well-being are well worth the effort. Remember, it's not about being perfect, but about making better choices most of the time. Every small step counts, and it's never too late to start.