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Learn How To Read Food Labels

It is important to remember that the information found on food labels is based on an average diet of 2,000 calories per day. Actual caloric and nutritional requirements vary by age, weight, gender, and activity levels. Use food labels as a **guide to determine whether a food is generally nutritious**, but don't worry about exact amounts as long as your child is growing normally.

Food Label Claims

Food claims are made by the manufacturer on the front of the package - for example, "fat free" or "no cholesterol." The FDA only allows claims on labels that are supported by scientific evidence. But even claims that indicate lower cholesterol, lower sodium, or lower fat content are regulated as follows:

1. **Reduced fat** has 25% less fat than the same regular brand.
2. **Light** means the product has 50% less fat than the same regular product.
3. **Low fat** means a product has less than 3 grams of fat per serving.

Even if a food is low in fat, the food may not necessarily be nutritious. Even a low-fat food may be high in sugar. Food companies also make claims such as no cholesterol (meaning there is no animal fat used in making the product), but that does not necessarily mean the product is really low in fat.

Serving Size and Servings Per Container

At the top of each food label is a serving size amount. The "servings per container or package" tells how many servings are in the whole package. So if one serving is 1 cup, and the entire package has 5 cups, there are five servings per package. These quantities are based on the amount people generally eat, and are determined by the manufacturer. Serving sizes are not necessarily recommended amounts.

Other nutritional information on the package is based on the listed serving size. So if there are two servings in the package, and you eat the entire package, then you must double all of the nutritional amounts listed.

Calories

A calorie is a unit of energy that measures how much energy a food provides to the body. The food label indicates how many calories are in one serving.

Calories From Fat

Calories from fat shows the total number of calories in one serving that comes from fat. No more than 30% of calories should come from fat in one day. That means if the food you eat over the course of a day contains 2,000 calories total, no more than 600 of these calories should come from fat.

Percentage of Daily Values

Percentage of daily values are listed in the right-hand column in percentages, and they tell how much of a certain nutrient a person will get from eating one serving of that food. The daily goal is to eat 100% of each of those nutrients. If a serving of a food has 20% protein, then that food is providing 20% of your daily protein needs.

Percentage of daily value is most useful for determining whether a food is high or low in certain nutrients. If a food has 5% or less of a nutrient, it is considered to be low in that nutrient.

A food is considered a good source of a nutrient if the percentage is between 10% and 19%. If the food has more than 20% of the daily value, it is considered high in that nutrient.

Total Fat

This number indicates how much fat is in a single serving of food and is measured in grams. Although eating too much fat can lead to obesity and other health problems, some fat is required by the body. Fats are an important source of energy (calories) - they contain twice as much energy (calories) per gram as protein or carbohydrates. Fats provide insulation from cold temperatures and cushioning for the skin, bones, and internal organs. Fat also carries and helps store certain important vitamins (A, D, E, and K). But because eating too much fat can contribute to health problems, including heart disease, adults and children (> 2 years old) should have less than 30% of their daily calorie intake come from fat.

Saturated Fat and Trans Fat

The amount of saturated fat is listed under total fat. **Saturated fats and trans fats** are often called "**bad fats**" because they raise cholesterol and increase a person's risk for developing heart disease. Both saturated and trans fats are solid at room temperature and **contribute to blocked blood vessels**.

Saturated fat usually comes from animal products like butter, cheese, whole milk, ice cream, and meats. **Trans fat** is naturally found in these same foods and are also in vegetable oils that have been specially treated, or hydrogenated, so they are solid at room temperature (the fats in stick margarine). Other foods that contain trans fat include some cookies, crackers, fried foods, snack foods, and processed foods.

If the label does not list *trans fat*, look in the ingredient list for words such as "*hydrogenated*," "*partially hydrogenated*," or "*shortening*". These names indicate that *trans fat* is present.

Saturated fats should be less than 10% of daily calorie intake. **Trans fat** intake should be **as low as possible**.

Unsaturated Fat

Unsaturated fats are also listed under total fat. These are fats that are liquid at room temperature. Foods high in unsaturated fat are **vegetable oils, nuts, and fish**.

Unsaturated fats are often called "**good fats**" because they don't raise cholesterol levels like saturated fats.

Cholesterol

Cholesterol is listed under the fat information (measured in milligrams). Cholesterol is important in producing vitamin D, some other hormones, and in building many other important substances in the body.

High cholesterol can increase the risk of developing atherosclerosis, a blockage and hardening of arteries that can result in a heart attack or stroke later in life.

The liver normally produces cholesterol. Dietary sources such as meat and poultry, eggs, and whole-milk dairy products, also contribute to the cholesterol level. Altering the diet and increasing exercise can reduce elevated cholesterol levels. In some cases, elevated cholesterol levels are an inherited trait, and dietary and exercise changes may not adequately lower the cholesterol level. Treatment with cholesterol lowering medicines is usually not considered in children until after 16 years of age.

Sodium

Sodium, a component of salt, is listed on the **Nutrition Facts** label in milligrams. Small amounts of sodium are necessary for keeping proper body fluid balance. Sodium also helps with the transmission of electrical signals through nerves.

Too much sodium can increase water retention and elevate blood pressure. Almost all foods naturally contain small amounts of sodium. Sodium also adds flavor and helps preserve food. Many processed foods contain greater amounts of sodium.

Avoid adding extra salt when cooking and keep the salt shaker off the table to decrease excessive salt intake.

Total Carbohydrate

Carbohydrates should be the primary source of energy, providing 50% to 60% of total daily calorie intake. Carbohydrates (grams) are made up of **simple** (called **sugars**), **complex** (called **starches**), dietary fibers, or other carbohydrates. **Simple carbohydrates** should be less than 10% of the total daily carbohydrates. The best sources of carbohydrates are whole-grain cereals, breads and brown rice. Other sources include **pastas, fruits, and some vegetables**.

Dietary Fiber

Dietary fiber is listed under total carbohydrates on food labels. Dietary fiber has no calories and is a necessary part of a healthy diet. High-fiber diets promote bowel regularity, may help reduce the risk of colon cancer, and can help reduce cholesterol levels.

Sugars

Sugars are listed under total carbohydrate on food labels and are found in most foods. Fruits contain simple sugars, but they also contain fiber, water, and vitamins. Foods such as whole-grain breads are high in complex carbohydrates, which provide better nutrition. Snack foods, candy, juices and soda have large amounts of added simple sugars, which provide "empty calories," and provide very little nutrition.

Protein

This listing tells you how much protein is in a single serving of a food and is measured in grams. Protein is a necessary building block for your body. If the body doesn't get enough fat and carbohydrates, it can use protein for energy. Foods high in protein include eggs, milk, meat, poultry, fish, cheese, yogurt, nuts, soybeans, and dried beans. Protein should make up about 10% to 20% of a person's daily calorie intake.

Vitamins A and C

Vitamin A and vitamin C are two important vitamins listed on the Nutrition Facts label. The amount for each vitamin in each serving is measured in percentage of daily values, so if a food has 80% of vitamin C, you're getting 80% of the vitamin C you need for the day.

Vitamin A usually appears first on a food label's list of vitamins and minerals. Vitamin A is important for good eyesight and helps maintain healthy skin. It's found in orange vegetables, such as carrots and squash, and in dark green, leafy vegetables.

Vitamin C is necessary to build and maintain building blocks of the body, heal wounds, and fight infections. Vitamin C is found in citrus fruits, other fruits, and some vegetables.

Calcium and Iron

The percentages of these two important minerals are listed and measured in percentage of daily values. Food companies are required to list the amounts of calcium and iron in all foods.

Calcium is necessary to build strong bones and teeth. Milk, other dairy products, yogurt, cheese, green leafy vegetables and Orange juice fortified with calcium are excellent calcium sources. Children between the ages of 1 and 3 require at least 500 milligrams of calcium per day, while 4- to 8-year-olds require 800-1000 milligrams. The calcium requirement for children from 9 to 18 years jumps up to 1,500 milligrams per day - the equivalent of 4 cups (24 ounces) of milk.

Good sources of iron include red meat, iron-fortified cereals, raisins, and dark green, leafy vegetables. Iron is necessary for the body to produce new, healthy red blood cells and the transport of oxygen to all areas of the body. Without an adequate supply of red blood cells (anemia), the oxygen delivery would decrease, greatly affecting body function. Teenage girls and women need extra iron to compensate for normal iron lost in the blood during menstruation.

Calories Per Gram

These labels show how many calories are in **ONE** gram of fat, carbohydrate, and protein. This information makes it easier to compare foods and make decisions on those foods that provide the best nutrition.

Label Listings for Avoiding Allergies

Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight, and this gives you an idea of how much of an ingredient the food contains in proportion to its overall weight.

Reading the ingredient list is especially important if someone in your family has a food allergy. Food allergies are a concern and eight foods account for 90% of food allergy reactions: milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soy, fish, shellfish, and tree nuts.

In some cases, it's easy to identify what's safe to eat by checking the listed ingredients on a label. However, some ingredients that may trigger an allergy reaction may be listed under an unfamiliar name (for example, "arachis oil" is another term for peanut oil, which would need to be avoided by a person with a peanut allergy).

Using Food Labels to Create a Well-Balanced Diet

As a parent, you can use food labels to your advantage by using them to plan nutritious and healthy meals for your children. The following tips will help you create healthy food choices using food labels.

- Offer your children a variety of foods. Insufficient amounts of nutrients can lead to deficiency and diseases. By giving your children a variety of healthy foods - including plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits - you can ensure that they take in a wide variety of nutrients. The Food Guide Pyramid can help you plan healthy meals for your family (and there's also a Food Guide Pyramid with modified numbers of servings for children age **2 to 6**).
- Choose a diet low in total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol. Limit total fat intake to no more than 30% of total calories per day.
- Read serving size information. What looks like a small package of food can actually contain more than one serving.
- Eat sugar and sodium in moderation.
- Choose healthy snacks. Snacks such as potato chips and cheese puffs are high in calories, sodium, cholesterol, and fat, and low in vitamins and minerals. Healthy snacks should include fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain breads. When people think of snacks, they often think of junk food. But snacks can be leftovers from meals, servings of fruit or vegetables, and other foods with high nutrition.
- Be skeptical of low-fat junk food. If the fat has been eliminated or cut back, the amount of sugar in the food may have increased. Many low-fat foods have nearly as many calories as their full-fat versions.
- Read all the labels on the foods you normally buy and use your new food label knowledge to create a well-balanced diet. It may seem complicated at first, but by using food label information to select foods that are high in nutrients, you will make better food choices.

Ready-to-Eat Breakfast Cereals

All our lives we've been told that it's important to eat breakfast. And this has been good advice! Breakfast eaters can work faster and concentrate better than non-breakfast eaters. Eating breakfast tends to improve creativity, endurance, and weight management. It even appears to help reduce tooth decay — at least in young children.

In the United States, ready-to-eat cereal is among the most popular breakfast choices. It's quick and it's easy - perfect first thing in the morning when very few people have the time or the inspiration to prepare meals. Fortunately, eating a ready-to-eat breakfast cereal can be a very nutritious way to begin the day.

Today's Cereals

Breakfast cereals, as we know them, are made from grains. The most popular breakfast cereals are made from corn, wheat, oats, or rice. Cereal can be found as flakes, puffs, shreds, rings, balls, or as popular cartoon characters. Cereal can be bright cheerful colors or dull browns and tans. Regardless of the form it takes, breakfast cereal can be a good source of nutrients and fiber. Most of the breakfast cereals available in the stores today are fortified with vitamins and minerals, ranging from 10-100% of the Daily Value (DV).

Daily Value is the amount of a nutrient such as calcium or vitamin B6, that an average, healthy person should consume each day. Cereals that provide 10-25% of the daily value of most nutrients may be good choices. Cereals that provide 100% of the Daily Value for most nutrients may be too much. Some of the newer cereals

claim to be promoting health by adding soy protein, flax, and dried fruit to their products. These additions will not hurt, but the amount in a serving of cereal is probably too small to really improve your health.

Choosing a Breakfast Cereal

When selecting a cereal, it's important to read the product label. Cereal grains are basically low in protein, low in fat, and high in complex carbohydrate. These grains are processed into the breakfast cereals we know by adding or removing sugars, proteins, fats, fiber, vitamins, minerals, flavorings, and colors.

Some of these changes are healthful, but some are not. A nutritious breakfast cereal is made from a whole grain. Ideally, 1-serving of this whole grain breakfast cereal should provide the following:

1. 100-200 calories
2. At least 2 grams protein
3. At least 3 grams fiber
4. No more than 8 grams sugar
5. No more than 3 grams fat
6. Approximately 25% of the Daily Value for key nutrients (iron, folate, B6 and B12).

Most cereals are not a good source of vitamin C, calcium, vitamin D, or phosphorous. This is one of the reasons that breakfast cereals are advertised as "...part of a nutritious breakfast." But for most of us, cereal is the breakfast. So, even if you add milk or yogurt to your cereal, and even if you drink a vitamin C rich juice in the morning, it's still beneficial to select a more healthful cereal.

Below is a chart that will help you compare the basic nutritional components found in 1-serving of 10 popular breakfast cereals:

<u>Cereal</u>	<u>Calories</u>	<u>Carbohydrates Complex</u>	<u>Carbohydrates Sugar</u>	<u>Protein grams</u>	<u>Fat grams</u>	<u>Fiber grams</u>
Cheerios	110	22	1	3	2	3
Rice Krispies	120	29	3	2	0	0
Corn flakes	100	24	2	2	0	1
Shredded Wheat	170	41	0	5	1	6
Raisin Bran	200	46	20	5	2	8
Granola	200	41	17	4	3	3
Lucky Charms	115	25	13	2	1	1
Frosted Flakes	115	28	12	1	0	1
Corn Pops	120	28	14	1	0	0
Cocoa Puffs	120	26	14	1	1	1

If the cereals you like the best are not the most nutritious choices, try mixing cereals. For example, if you really enjoy the flavor of Frosted Flakes, then pour yourself a serving of Frosted Flakes. But add a handful of Shredded Wheat or a plain bran cereal to get more fiber and protein without additional sugars. If you prefer the unsweetened flavor of Rice Krispies, then pour yourself a serving of Rice Krispies. But mix in some Cheerios to provide more fiber and key nutrients without adding fat or sugar. There are many combinations that will give you the flavor you like and nutrients you need.

A Few Additional Cereal Considerations

- Cereals with nuts will have more fat.
- Cereals with fruit will have more sugar.

- Nutritious cereals - straight out of the box - make great snacks.
- 1-2 cups of cereal can be added to cookie recipes for additional texture, fiber, and nutrients.
- If you eat cereal as cereal bars, follow these same selection guidelines



Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 Cup (31g/1.1 oz.)
Servings Per Container About 11

Amount Per Serving	Cereal with 1/2 Cup Vitamins A&D Fat Free Milk	
	Cereal	Fat Free Milk
Calories	110	150
Calories from Fat	0	0
% Daily Value**		
Total Fat 0g*	0%	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%	0%
Trans Fat 0g		
Cholesterol 0mg	0%	0%
Sodium 220mg	9%	12%
Potassium 60mg	2%	7%
Total Carbohydrate 22g	7%	9%
Dietary Fiber less than 1g	3%	3%
Sugars 4g		
Other Carbohydrate 18g		
Protein 7g	3%	13%
Vitamin A	15%	20%
Vitamin C	35%	35%
Calcium	0%	15%
Iron	45%	45%
Vitamin E	35%	35%
Thiamin	35%	40%
Riboflavin	35%	45%
Niacin	35%	35%
Vitamin B ₆	100%	100%
Folic Acid	100%	100%
Vitamin B ₁₂	100%	110%
Phosphorus	6%	20%
Magnesium	4%	8%
Zinc	6%	8%
Selenium	10%	10%

* Amount in cereal. One half cup of fat free milk contributes an additional 40 calories, 65mg sodium, 6g total carbohydrate (6g sugars), and 4g protein.

** 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
Saturated Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Potassium	3,500mg	3,500mg	
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g	
Dietary Fiber	25g	30g	

Calories per gram: Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4
Ingredients: Rice, wheat gluten, sugar, defatted wheat germ, salt, high fructose corn syrup, dried whey, malt flavoring, calcium caseinate.

Vitamins and Minerals: Ascorbic acid (vitamin C), alpha tocopherol acetate (vitamin E), reduced iron, niacinamide, pyridoxine hydrochloride (vitamin B₆), riboflavin (vitamin B₂), thiamin hydrochloride (vitamin B₁), vitamin A palmitate, folic acid and vitamin B₁₂. To maintain quality, BHT has been added to the packaging.



Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 Cup (31g/1.1 oz.)
Servings Per Container About 14

Amount Per Serving	Cereal with 1/2 Cup Vitamins A&D Fat Free Milk	
	Cereal	Fat Free Milk
Calories	120	160
Calories from Fat	0	0
% Daily Value**		
Total Fat 0g*	0%	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%	0%
Trans Fat 0g		
Cholesterol 0mg	0%	0%
Sodium 120mg	5%	8%
Potassium 25mg	1%	7%
Total Carbohydrate 28g	9%	11%
Dietary Fiber less than 1g	1%	1%
Sugars 14g		
Other Carbohydrate 14g		
Protein 1g		
Vitamin A	10%	15%
Vitamin C	10%	10%
Calcium	0%	15%
Iron	10%	10%
Vitamin D	10%	25%
Thiamin	25%	30%
Riboflavin	25%	35%
Niacin	25%	25%
Vitamin B ₆	25%	25%
Folic Acid	25%	25%
Vitamin B ₁₂	25%	35%
Zinc	10%	15%

* Amount in cereal. One half cup of fat free milk contributes an additional 40 calories, 65mg sodium, 6g total carbohydrate (6g sugars), and 4g protein.

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Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Potassium	3,500mg	3,500mg	
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g	
Dietary Fiber	25g	30g	

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

Ingredients: Milled corn, sugar, corn syrup, molasses, salt, partially hydrogenated vegetable oil (one or more of: coconut, cottonseed, and soybean)***, sodium ascorbate and ascorbic acid (vitamin C), niacinamide, reduced iron, zinc oxide, wheat starch, pyridoxine hydrochloride (vitamin B₆), riboflavin (vitamin B₂), thiamin hydrochloride (vitamin B₁), annatto color, vitamin A palmitate, BHT (preservative), folic acid, vitamin B₁₂ and vitamin D.

*** Adds a negligible amount of fat.

**CONTAINS WHEAT INGREDIENTS.
CORN USED IN THIS PRODUCT
CONTAINS TRACES OF SOYBEANS.**

Exchange: 1 1/2 Carbohydrates
The dietary exchanges are based on the Exchange Lists for Meal Planning, ©2003 by The American Diabetes Association, Inc. and The American Dietetic Association.



• FAT FREE • CHOLESTEROL FREE

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 Cup (28g/1.0 oz.)
Servings Per Container About 12

Amount Per Serving	Cereal with 1/2 Cup Vitamins A&D Fat Free Milk	
	Cereal	Fat Free Milk
Calories	100	140
Calories from Fat	0	0
% Daily Value**		
Total Fat 0g*	0%	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%	0%
Trans Fat 0g		
Cholesterol 0mg	0%	0%
Sodium 200mg	8%	11%
Potassium 25mg	1%	7%
Total Carbohydrate 24g	8%	10%
Dietary Fiber 1g	4%	4%
Sugars 2g		
Other Carbohydrate 21g		
Protein 2g		
Vitamin A	10%	15%
Vitamin C	10%	10%
Calcium	0%	15%
Iron	45%	45%
Vitamin D	10%	25%
Thiamin	25%	30%
Riboflavin	25%	35%
Niacin	25%	25%
Vitamin B ₆	25%	25%
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Potassium	3,500mg	3,500mg	
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g	
Dietary Fiber	25g	30g	

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

Ingredients: Milled corn, sugar, malt flavoring, high fructose corn syrup, salt.
Vitamins and Iron: Iron, niacinamide, sodium ascorbate and ascorbic acid (vitamin C), pyridoxine hydrochloride (vitamin B₆), riboflavin (vitamin B₂), thiamin hydrochloride (vitamin B₁), vitamin A palmitate, folic acid, vitamin B₁₂ and vitamin D. To maintain quality, BHT has been added to the packaging.



Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 3/4 Cup (31g/1.1 oz.)
Servings Per Container About 14

Amount Per Serving	Cereal with 1/2 Cup Vitamins A&D Fat Free Milk	
	Cereal	Fat Free Milk
Calories	120	160
Calories from Fat	0	0
% Daily Value**		
Total Fat 0g*	0%	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%	0%
Trans Fat 0g		
Cholesterol 0mg	0%	0%
Sodium 150mg	6%	9%
Potassium 20mg	1%	6%
Total Carbohydrate 28g	9%	11%
Dietary Fiber 1g	3%	3%
Sugars 12g		
Other Carbohydrate 15g		
Protein 1g		
Vitamin A	10%	15%
Vitamin C	10%	10%
Calcium	0%	15%
Iron	25%	25%
Vitamin D	10%	25%
Thiamin	25%	30%
Riboflavin	25%	35%
Niacin	25%	25%
Vitamin B ₆	25%	25%
Folic Acid	25%	25%
Vitamin B ₁₂	25%	35%

* Amount in cereal. One half cup of fat free milk contributes an additional 40 calories, 65mg sodium, 6g total carbohydrate (6g sugars), and 4g protein.

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Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Potassium	3,500mg	3,500mg	
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g	
Dietary Fiber	25g	30g	

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

Ingredients: Milled corn, sugar, malt flavoring, high fructose corn syrup, salt, sodium ascorbate and ascorbic acid (vitamin C), niacinamide, iron, pyridoxine hydrochloride (vitamin B₆), riboflavin (vitamin B₂), thiamin hydrochloride (vitamin B₁), vitamin A palmitate, folic acid, BHT (preservative), vitamin B₁₂ and vitamin D.

**CORN USED IN THIS PRODUCT
CONTAINS TRACES OF SOYBEANS.**

Exchange: 1 1/2 Carbohydrates
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**When choosing healthy foods, keep the sugar carbohydrates and saturated fat as low as possible. Avoid Trans fat.
Compare labels from Corn Flakes with Frosted Flakes (above).**