HEALTH BASICS

# Food labeling

Food labeling explains a packaged food's ingredients, nutrients, allergens, serving size, and claims.

**WHAT IT IS**
Information printed on food packaging

**WHERE IT COMES UP**
Packaged foods, drinks, supplements, and some restaurant menus

**WHY IT MATTERS**
Supports informed choices about nutrients, ingredients, and allergens

**WHAT IT IS NOT**
Not a disease or diagnosis

**WHO TO ASK**
A registered dietitian or appropriate healthcare professional

**HOW IT IS CHECKED**
Package details and applicable labeling standards

## Overview

Food labeling is the information provided on food and drink packaging. It can describe ingredients, serving size, nutrients, and allergens.

This article focuses mainly on packaged foods regulated in the United States. The Food and Drug Administration regulates most packaged foods, while the Department of Agriculture regulates most meat, poultry, and processed egg products. Rules differ between countries.

Labels can help you compare foods or check whether a product meets a specific need. They cannot determine by themselves whether a food is "good," "bad," or suitable for everyone.

Fresh produce and some foods from small businesses may not have a full Nutrition Facts label. Restaurant menu labeling follows separate rules and does not apply to every restaurant.

## How it works

The Nutrition Facts panel starts with serving size and servings per container. Serving sizes reflect amounts people typically consume; they are not recommended portions.

Calories and nutrients are listed per serving. If you eat two servings, you generally consume twice the listed amounts.

The percent Daily Value , shown as `%DV`, indicates how much one serving contributes to a daily reference amount. As a general guide, 5% DV or less is low and 20% DV or more is high. Daily Values are reference points, not personal treatment targets.

The panel usually lists calories, fat, saturated fat, sodium, carbohydrate, fiber, total and added sugars, protein, and selected vitamins and minerals. Total sugars include naturally occurring and added sugars. Added sugars include sugars introduced during processing and certain sugars from syrups, honey, or concentrated juices.

The ingredient list names ingredients in descending order by weight. Compound ingredients may list their components in parentheses.

Nine major allergens must be declared on covered US labels: milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, soybeans, and sesame. They may appear in the ingredient list or a nearby "Contains" statement.

Warnings such as "may contain" or "made in a facility that also processes" are voluntary statements about possible cross-contact. Their absence does not prove cross-contact is impossible.

Some claims, including "low sodium" or "high fiber," have regulatory definitions. Other front-of-package phrases provide only part of the picture. Check the serving size, Nutrition Facts, and ingredients rather than relying on one claim.

## Why it matters for your health

Labels can help you compare products within your overall eating pattern. If you are monitoring sodium, saturated fat, added sugars, or another nutrient, the amount per serving and `%DV` can make comparisons easier. Personal needs may differ because of age, pregnancy, energy needs, medications, or medical conditions.

People with food allergies should check ingredient and allergen information every time they buy a product because recipes and manufacturing practices can change.

People with celiac disease must avoid gluten from wheat, barley, and rye. In the United States, foods labeled "gluten-free" must meet the FDA definition. Wheat-free does not necessarily mean gluten-free because barley or rye may be present.

Labels may also support care plans for high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, or kidney disease. Relevant nutrients vary: total carbohydrate may matter for glucose planning, while

sodium, potassium, or phosphorus may matter in some kidney conditions. A label cannot set your personal target.

## What can go wrong

A serving size may be mistaken for the whole package. If a bag or bottle contains several servings, the total calories and nutrients consumed may be much higher than the single-serving figures.

Claims can also mislead. "No added sugar" does not mean sugar-free or carbohydrate-free. "Reduced" means less than a comparison food, not necessarily a low amount. "Organic" describes production and handling, not whether a food meets your nutritional needs.

Rounding rules may allow a label to show zero when one serving contains a small amount. Several servings can make those amounts add up.

Allergic reactions may occur when an allergen is overlooked, a recipe changes, or cross-contact happens. Label reading reduces risk but cannot eliminate it.

An allergic reaction can become an emergency. Call emergency services for trouble breathing, throat tightness, faintness, severe wheezing, or a reaction affecting more than one body system. If prescribed epinephrine, follow your emergency plan and use it as directed. Do not rely on the label once a serious reaction has started.

Except for infant formula, federal product dates generally concern expected quality rather than guaranteeing safety. Safe storage, handling, recall information, and signs of spoilage still matter. Do not use infant formula after its labeled "use by" date.

## What you can do

Start with serving size and compare it with the amount you expect to consume. If the package contains several servings, calculate nutrients for your actual portion.

Use `%DV` to compare similar products. If you have an individual target, use the listed grams or milligrams rather than treating the Daily Value as your goal.

You can also:

For diagnosed food allergy or celiac disease, ask which names, derivatives, and cross-contact statements to watch for. If a label is unclear, contact the manufacturer before eating the food. A label may not confirm that an untested product is free from all cross-contact.

Report suspected undeclared allergens, incorrect labels, or food-related illness to the

manufacturer and appropriate government food-safety service. Check official recall notices rather than relying only on social media.

Routine questions about nutrient targets or dietary planning can usually wait for a scheduled appointment. Symptoms of a severe allergic reaction require emergency care.

- Read the full ingredient list when avoiding an ingredient
- Recheck familiar products because recipes can change
- Compare products using the same portion size
- Keep the package, lot code, and receipt after a suspected labeling problem
- Ask a registered dietitian how to apply labels to a medical nutrition plan

## Common questions

Does "natural" mean healthier?

Not necessarily. It does not summarize calories, nutrients, ingredients, or processing. Check the Nutrition Facts and ingredient list.

Is the serving size the amount I should eat?

No. It standardizes the label using an amount people commonly consume. Your portion may differ.

Does "zero sugar" mean zero carbohydrate?

No. A food may contain starch, fiber, or other carbohydrates. Check total carbohydrate when it matters to you.

Is "wheat-free" the same as "gluten-free"?

No. Wheat-free foods may contain gluten from barley or rye. Look for a gluten-free label when medically necessary.

Are "sell by," "best by," and "use by" dates safety deadlines?

Usually not. Most concern inventory or quality. Infant formula is an important exception. Follow storage instructions and recall advice.

What if a product has no Nutrition Facts panel?

Some foods are exempt. Ask the seller or manufacturer for ingredient or nutrition information, although it may not be available.

## Sources

- US Food and Drug Administration. "How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label."
- US Food and Drug Administration. "Food Allergies."
- US Food and Drug Administration. "Label Claims for Conventional Foods and Dietary Supplements."
- US Food and Drug Administration. "Gluten and Food Labeling."
- US Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service. "Food Product Dating."
- Electronic Code of Federal Regulations. "21 CFR § 101.9-Nutrition labeling of food."