DIET & WEIGHT

How to Read a Nutrition Label Without the Hype

A quick way to look past front-of-pack promises and compare what you will actually eat.

The front is trying to win you over

You are standing in a supermarket aisle with two boxes making competing claims. One hints at health. The other talks about responsibility, purity or some other desirable quality. Both would like you to make your decision before turning the package around.

That front-of-pack language can be persuasive without answering the question you came with: what will this food contribute to the way you actually eat? A 2024 systematic review of 30 studies involving 19,040 participants found that shoppers often valued environmental and social-responsibility information as much as, or more than, nutrition information. Organic labelling was the most preferred attribute, apparently accompanied by a health inference.

That does not mean those claims are meaningless. It means they answer different questions. Environmental information may tell you something you value about production. Social-responsibility information may influence which company or system you want to support. Neither, by itself, tells you the calories, sodium, fibre, saturated fat or added sugar in the portion you plan to eat.

So separate the decisions. You can care about how food is produced and still inspect its nutrition. Treat the front as an invitation, not a verdict. The useful comparison begins on the Nutrition Facts panel, where the same categories appear across packaged foods and drinks.

Start with the number marketing cannot resize

Before looking at calories or any nutrient, find the serving size and the number of servings in the container. Serving size is based on how much people usually eat or drink at one time. It is not a recommendation for how much you should have.

Your portion is what you choose to eat. The serving is the amount used for the figures on the label. Those may match, but they often do not. A package can contain several servings even when it looks like something you might finish at once.

This distinction changes every number below it. If a bottle contains two servings and you drink the whole bottle, you receive twice the listed calories, sugar and other nutrients. If you eat half a labelled serving, the relevant amounts are halved. Some labels show both per-serving and

whole-package information, but many give only the figures for one serving.

Serving sizes can also differ between products, so a quick glance can create a false comparison. One cereal, snack or prepared meal may appear lower in something simply because its figures describe a smaller amount. Before comparing two labels, check whether the serving quantities are reasonably alike-or do the small piece of arithmetic needed to compare the amount you would really eat.

Treat the front as an invitation, not a verdict.

Let the percentages do the sorting

The panel lists calories and nutrients per serving, including total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, fibre, total sugar, added sugar, protein, vitamins and minerals. You do not need to give every line equal attention every time. Use the label to answer the question that matters for this particular choice.

The percent Daily Value (%DV) is the quickest sorting tool. It shows how much one serving contributes to a daily recommendation for a nutrient. As a rule of thumb, 5% DV or less is low and 20% DV or more is high. The territory between those points is neither automatically good nor automatically bad; it needs context.

General healthy-eating guidance emphasises variety, including vegetables, fruits and whole grains, while getting enough fibre and limiting salt, added sugars and saturated fat. It also highlights nutrients people need to get enough of, including calcium, vitamin D and potassium. The label lets you compare foods according to one of those aims rather than according to whichever message has been given the largest type on the front.

"Low" and "high" are tools, not moral grades. A high percentage may be useful when you are comparing fibre or a nutrient you want enough of. It may be less useful when you are trying to limit sodium, added sugar or saturated fat. The same number takes its meaning from the nutrient beside it and from what else you eat.

A label helps, but it does not choose for you

Food labels can change decisions, although their power has limits. A 2016 systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised studies found that labelling increased the proportion of people selecting a healthier product by about 18%. Interpretive systems such as traffic-light labels appeared marginally more effective than some alternatives.

The same review found an estimated reduction of about 3.6% in calories selected or

consumed, but that result was not statistically significant. In other words, labels appeared better at steering product choice than at proving that people consumed fewer calories. The available evidence could not establish how individual labelling systems affected calorie intake.

That distinction matters because a panel provides information, not a complete eating plan. How much you need varies with factors including age, weight, metabolism, sex and physical activity. A labelled serving may be more or less than the amount that is right for you.

Healthy eating need not mean a very strict diet or the removal of every favourite food. Preferences, cultural traditions and budget matter too. The point of reading a label is not to turn lunch into an examination. It is to make one useful comparison: which option fits what you need from this meal, and what portion will you actually have?

On Monday, compare the food you really eat

Choose one packaged food or drink you buy regularly. You will need that package and one similar alternative from the same shelf. Ignore the front at first. Turn both around and place the Nutrition Facts panels side by side.

First, compare serving sizes and servings per container. Decide what amount you would ordinarily eat or drink. If that is two servings, mentally double every listed figure; if the products use different serving quantities, adjust the comparison rather than accepting the headline numbers as equivalent.

Next, choose only two or three lines that matter for this decision. You might compare fibre alongside added sugar, or saturated fat alongside sodium. Use percent Daily Value to spot what is low and high, remembering that low may be desirable for something you want to limit while high may help with something you want enough of.

Then turn the packages over and reconsider the marketing. You may still prefer the organic, environmental or social-responsibility claim, and that is a legitimate value choice. But now you know what it buys-and what it does not tell you. For the next week, repeat this with one regular purchase at a time. All it takes is two packages and the willingness to turn them around.

Where this comes from

- Food Labeling

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/foodlabeling.html
- Nutrition

MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/nutrition.html

- Read the Food Label Fact Sheet

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute · https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/read-food-label-fact-sheet

- Food Portions: Choosing Just Enough for You

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases · https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/weight-management/just-enough-food-portions

- Impact of food labelling systems on food choices and eating behaviours: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized studies.

Obesity reviews : an official journal of the International Association for the Study of Obesity, 2016 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26693944/

- Diet and nutrition information and support needs in pelvic radiotherapy: A systematic, mixed-methods review.

European journal of cancer care, 2021 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32851712/

- Sustainable Diet Dimensions. Comparing Consumer Preference for Nutrition, Environmental and Social Responsibility Food Labelling: A Systematic Review.

Sustainability, 2024 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39035350/