

Understanding Food Labels



By understanding how to read food labels, you'll be able to make heart healthier choices at the grocery store. All you need is a little information. Read on to learn about the three different types of information found on the food label:

1. Nutrition Information.

This is the most useful information for heart health.

2. Nutrition Claims.

These are also important and can be used with Nutrition Information.

3. The Ingredient List.

This is useful if you have food allergies or specific dietary needs.

1. Nutrition Information

Reading the Nutrition Information panel is the best way to determine the nutritional value of a food, and it can be found on many packaged foods. The Nutrition Information panel gives you the suggested serving size and the nutritional content for the stated serving. A sample panel is shown at right, and each element of the panel is described in detail below.

NUTRITION INFORMATION		
Per serving		
Energy		Cal Kj
Protein		g
Fat		g
Polyunsaturates		g
Monounsaturates		g
Saturates		g
Trans Fat		g
Cholesterol		mg
Carbohydrate		g
Sugars		g
Starch		g
Fibre		g
Sodium		mg
Potassium		mg
Percentage of Recommended Daily Intake (RDI)		
Vitamins		%
Minerals		%

Per serving

"Per serving" is the size of a suggested serving. Nutrition information for each nutrient is based on this serving. If your portions are larger, you will need to increase the calculation of your nutrient intake accordingly.

Aim for portion sizes in line with the recommendations from Canada's Food Guide for Healthy Eating, available from your heart health educator.

Energy

Energy is the fuel you need to function, and is measured in calories and kilojoules (KJ)—the metric equivalent of calories. One calorie converts to 4.2 KJ.

A heart healthy lifestyle includes balancing your calorie intake with regular physical activity to maintain a healthy body weight.

Protein

Protein provides the building blocks for all body tissues — muscles, bones, teeth. Found mainly in meats, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, and legumes, protein provides 4 calories of energy per gram.

For heart healthy eating, choose sources of protein that are lower in saturated fat—legumes, lean meats, skinless poultry, fish, and lower-fat dairy products.

Comparing foods for heart healthy eating

Nutrition information labels can help you compare similar foods. When it comes to heart healthy eating, pay attention to the total amount and types of fat, fibre content, and sodium levels of a product. Choose a product that is:

- Lower in total fat, especially saturated fat, and has virtually no trans fat.
- Higher in fibre.
- Lower in sodium.

Fat

Fat is an essential part of your diet. It is a source of energy, providing 9 calories per gram. It also carries vitamins, and enhances the flavour of food. The key is to limit the amount of fat you eat and understand how the different kinds of fat affect your heart's health.

For heart healthy eating, limit the grams of fat per day to 65 g for the average woman and 90 g for the average man.

• Polyunsaturates and monounsaturates

These unsaturated fats play an important role in your diet. Polyunsaturated fat is a valuable source of essential fatty acids, and it has been shown to lower blood cholesterol levels.

Read labels to find foods in which polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fat make up the highest level of total fat.

• Saturates and trans fat

Saturated fat, found mostly in foods that come from animal sources, has been shown to raise blood cholesterol levels. Trans fat has also been shown to raise blood cholesterol. Trans fat is formed when liquid oils are hardened through hydrogenation and also occurs naturally in some foods.

Look for foods that are low in saturated fat and limit the grams per day from saturated fat to 22 g for the average woman and 30 g for the average man. In addition, look for foods that are non-hydrogenated and therefore contain virtually no trans fat.

• Cholesterol

Dietary cholesterol is found in foods of animal origins, such as butter. Plant-based foods do not contain cholesterol.

Although dietary cholesterol is not as closely linked with raising blood cholesterol as saturated fat, for heart healthy eating, moderation is advised.

Carbohydrate

Carbohydrates are a source of energy, and provide 4 calories per gram.

• Sugars/Starch

Sugars and starch are prime sources of fuel for the body.

• Fibre

Fibre does not yield significant calories because it is not well digested. A diet high in fibre is thought to play a role in the prevention of heart disease, stroke, and some cancers, aids bowel regularity, and helps control blood sugar levels for diabetics.

Aim for 25 to 30 grams of dietary fibre per day.

Sodium/Potassium

These nutrients play an important role in regulating blood pressure. Sodium, of which the best known form is table salt, has been linked with raising blood pressure. Potassium plays a positive role in blood pressure regulation.

Help maintain a healthy blood pressure by limiting your intake of sodium. Consume potassium-rich foods more often, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products.

Percentage of Recommended Daily Intake (RDI)

This listing of vitamins and minerals indicates the percentage of the recommended daily amount found in the particular food.

For heart healthy eating, look for foods that are a good source of Vitamin E, which has been linked to the prevention of heart disease.