

# Food labels 101

What you need to know to make sense of nutrition labels

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Making healthy choices in the grocery store can be an overwhelming process—especially when it comes to making sense of food labels. It can be a challenge to understand what nutritional labels are telling you—and what’s really behind the health claims on some packaging. If you’re confused, you’re certainly not alone.

All food products in Canada require a nutritional label, with the following exceptions: spices, herbs, fresh vegetables and fruits, raw meat, poultry, fish and seafood, foods prepared or processed at the store and items with minimal nutrients such as alcoholic beverages.

Nutritional labels can help consumers control their intake of specific nutrients and allow them to compare the composition of various products. All labels list calories and 13 core nutrients: fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrate, fibre, sugars, protein, vitamins A and C, calcium and iron.

Consider the label shown on the next page, which lists the nutritional information for whole wheat bread.

The first thing to look at is the serving size. Is it realistic? Ask yourself if you would eat more or less than this, and calculate nutrient content accordingly. The serving size is also

helpful when comparing products; keep in mind that serving sizes for similar products are not always the same. Also consider the volume versus the weight of the product—a serving for cereal A may be ½ cup and for cereal B, ¼ cup. If they both weigh 28 g, they can be directly compared.

The numbers immediately after the nutrients, measured in grams or milligrams, are the actual amounts found in the food. Referring to the label at right, a two-slice serving (64 g) provides 3 g fibre, 140 calories and 1.5 g fat. These numbers are not always helpful when considering nutritional value, because most people don’t know their daily target amounts for each nutrient.

The “% Daily Value” (% DV) allows consumers to determine whether the item is high or low in a particular aspect. The Daily Values for vitamins and minerals are based on the highest recommended intakes for most people, but keep in mind that we all have different needs. The general rule is that a % DV of 5 per cent or less means that a product is low in that particular nutrient (except fibre, where 4 per cent is considered high). A value of 15 per cent or

## The nutrients in more detail

**Calories:** Calories are the amount of energy in food. They come from fat, carbohydrates, and protein. 3,500 calories equals about one pound of fat; eating too many calories will result in weight gain, while limiting intake will result in weight loss.

**Fat:** You want to limit your overall intake of fats, but especially limit your saturated and trans fats. Replacing saturated fats with “good,” or unsaturated fats, like those found in nuts, mackerel and salmon, has been shown to help lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease. Choose products with a total fat of around 5%, and no more than 10% for saturated and trans fats.

**Cholesterol:** Foods that are high in saturated and trans fats may increase blood cholesterol level to a greater degree than does dietary cholesterol. Only some people with high cholesterol are impacted by the cholesterol they eat; it’s best to discuss this with your physician.

**Sodium:** High sodium or salt intake may lead to high blood pressure and weight gain, so limit your intake. You want to be especially mindful of the sodium content in processed and prepared foods (frozen meals, condiments,

## Nutrition Facts

Per 2 slices (64g)

Amount	% Daily Value
<b>Calories</b> 140	
<b>Fat</b> 1.5 g	2 %
Saturated 0.3 g + Trans 0.5 g	4 %
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0 mg	
<b>Sodium</b> 290 mg	12 %
<b>Carbohydrate</b> 26 g	9 %
Fibre 3 g	12 %
Sugars 2 g	
<b>Protein</b> 5 g	
Vitamin A 0 %	Vitamin C 0 %
Calcium 4 %	Iron 10 %

The nutrition facts table from a loaf of whole wheat bread.  
Source: Health Canada.

higher means that the product is high in that nutrient. You should aim low for total fat, saturated and trans fats, cholesterol and sodium. Aim high for fibre, vitamins A and C and minerals (calcium & iron).

Informed grocery shopping may take a little time but once you're familiar with the product labels, you'll be able to shop confidently, knowing that you're making the right food choices for you and your family. ♣

sauces, bottled and canned foods) and when eating out. If you have high blood pressure or are at risk, it's important to stick to products with a 5% DV per serving; otherwise, try not to surpass 10% DV.

**Carbohydrates:** Complex carbohydrates provide the main fuel for your brain and muscles. Main sources are grains, fruits and dairy products. Simple carbs, which come from refined sugars, provide calories, but little nutrition.

**Fibre:** A non-digestible carbohydrate that aids in the management of heart disease, diabetes, weight and constipation. Look for high fibre breads, cereals, pastas and rice. Other good sources of fibre include fruit, vegetables and legumes (beans, peas and lentils).

**Protein:** Builds and maintains muscles, blood cells, bones and teeth. It also helps you feel full longer, so incorporate a small amount with meals and snacks—but be careful not to overdo it: extra protein will be stored as fat.

**Vitamins and minerals:** These nutrients play a role in all functions in the body. Calcium, iron and vitamins A and C are important in the development of bones and teeth, in maintaining energy levels, blood cell counts and eyesight and in helping to fight infection.



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