



READING FOOD LABELS

WHAT'S IN THE PACKAGE?



With so many people purchasing packaged foods, it makes sense to read labels carefully to learn how nutritious the product really is.

Since 1994, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has required that the breakdown of nutrients and ingredients be listed on food labels. Still, label reading can be somewhat daunting because many times the product contains so many food additives that you won't have a clue what they are or even if they will benefit you nutritionally.

With that in mind, here are some guidelines so you can make the most informed choices when buying packaged foods:

- Notice how many additives are listed on the label. Several additives, such as artificial colors, stabilizers, and preservatives, indicate that the nutritional content of the food may be quite low.

Notice whether the food is low in sugar and high in fiber.

High fiber = 5 grams or more per serving

Good amount of fiber = 2.5 or more

Sugar-free: less than $\frac{1}{2}$ gram per serving

Reduced sugar = 25% less sugar

No added sugar = no sugar added during processing or packaging

Even though the package is labeled “fat free,” it is usually higher in sugar and carbohydrates than regular foods.

Notice the number of calories and nutrients per serving size. For example, one serving of macaroni and cheese may contain only 200 calories, but if the box contains 3 servings and you eat the entire portion in the box, you would be consuming at least 600 calories.

Minimize the purchase of foods packaged in plastic and Styrofoam. Not only does this congest our landfills, but also some chemicals may leach into the foods.

Some additives to avoid are artificial colors, excess sugars, salt, trans fats, cholesterol, preservatives, such as BHT and BHA, as well as nitrites (deli items) and sulfites (dried fruit).

Find out if there are any vitamins or minerals listed on the label.

If you know you are sensitive or allergic to certain foods, find out the disguised names used by the manufacturers for that food. For example, if you are sensitive to dairy, it can be hidden in foods that have “casein” or “caseinate” listed on the label.

Watch out for the types of fats and the sources of the fats. Just because the food has vegetable oil doesn’t mean that it is healthy. Most oils used in prepared and packaged foods are hydrogenated trans fats or are already rancid.

Learn enough about some of the ingredients to know that you are not just buying a package of chemicals with no nutritional value.

Know that some ingredients are actually one type of substance, but labeled under another name. For example, MSG is still found in packaged foods. Unfortunately, even though it is listed by the FDA as “generally recognized as safe” (GRAS) and is a natural substance, many people have reactions to MSG. Not listing MSG on the label could have health consequences for those who are sensitive.

MSG CAN BE DISGUISED UNDER OTHER NAMES

- Texturized vegetable protein
- Hydrolyzed protein
- Natural flavoring
- Soy protein isolate
- Protein hydrolysate
- Sodium or calcium caseinate
- Aged cheeses
- Autolyzed yeast extract
- Soy sauce

Sodium should be less than 2,400 mg. per day. Low sodium = 140 mg. or less per serving

Low cholesterol = 20 mg. or less of cholesterol and 2 grams of saturated fat or less per serving. Cholesterol free = less than 2 mg. of cholesterol per serving.

Fat: no more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of your total fat or 10% of daily calories should come from saturated fat.