

DIABETES & FOOD

Reading Food Labels

Making Sense of Food Labels

Trying to figure out nutritional information on labels and packaging isn't easy. The good news is that we can help. These food labels are especially helpful if you use carb counting to plan your meals!

If you get tripped up on food content claims, you're not alone. Fat free vs. low fat vs. reduced fat. Low cholesterol vs. reduced cholesterol. It's confusing, and it can be tough when you're trying to make the right choices.

Serving size

Start by looking at the serving size. All of the information on the label is based on the serving size listed. If you eat more, that means you'll be getting more calories, carbohydrates, etc. than what is listed.

Amount per serving



The information on the left side of the label tells you the total of the different nutrients in one serving of the food. Use these numbers to compare labels of similar foods.

Calories

Calories are a unit of energy—think of them as the energy your body consumes and uses for bodily functions. Curious how many calories you need? Talk with a registered dietitian nutritionist (RD/RDN).

Total carbohydrate

Total carbohydrate on the label includes all three types of carbohydrate: sugar, starch and fiber. It's important to use the total grams when counting carbs or choosing which foods to include. Below the Total Carbohydrate (carbs), you will find a breakdown of the types of carbohydrate in the food. Learn more about carbs.

Added sugar

One of the three types of carbohydrates in food is sugar. As of January 2021, labels must include added sugar to help you know the difference between sugar that occurs naturally in the food (like yogurt or fruit) and sugar that was added during processing (like in cookies, candy and soda). Many labels have already made the change. [Learn more about sugar and the three main types of carbohydrates.](#)

Fiber

Fiber is the part of plant foods that is not digested—or for some types, only partially digested. Dried beans such as kidney or pinto beans, fruits, vegetables and whole

intact grains are all good sources of fiber. The amount of fiber you need depends on your age and gender. Healthy adults need between 25 and 38 grams of fiber a day on average—you can find recommendations for your age group and gender in the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) (DGA). [Learn more about fiber and the three main types of carbohydrates.](#)

Sugar alcohols

Sugar alcohols are a type of sugar substitute that have fewer calories per gram than sugars and starches. Sorbitol, xylitol and mannitol are examples of sugar alcohols. If a food contains sugar alcohols, it would be listed on the label under Total Carbohydrate. It's important to keep in mind that foods that contain sugar alcohols are not necessarily low in carbohydrate or calories. And, just because a package says "sugar-free" on the outside does not mean that it is calorie or carbohydrate-free. Always check the label for the grams of total carbohydrate and calories.

Fats

Total fat tells you how much fat is in one serving of the food. In general when it comes to fat, try to replace foods high in saturated fat or trans fat with foods rich in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats to reduce your risk of heart disease. [Learn more about fats.](#)

Sodium

Sodium is the scientific term for salt. It does not affect blood sugar. However, excess dietary sodium increases your risk of high blood pressure and heart disease. With some foods, you can taste how salty they are, such as pickles or bacon. But there is also hidden salt in many foods, like salad dressings, lunch meat, canned soups and other packaged foods. Reading labels can help you find these hidden sources and compare the sodium in different foods. Whether you have

diabetes or not, 2300 milligrams (mg) or less per day is the general recommendation. If you have high blood pressure, talk with your health care team to find out the best goal for you.

List of ingredients

Ingredient lists can be a helpful tool. Ingredients are listed in order by weight with the first ingredient being the highest amount in the food. Knowing the ingredients is useful in making healthy choices like increasing fiber (look for words like whole grain, whole wheat, etc.) or decreasing sugar (look for words like cane sugar, agave, maple syrup, honey, etc.).

Percent Daily Values (%DV)

The Percent Daily Values for each nutrient are found in the right column on the label. These tell you what percent of each nutrient the food provides if you were on a 2,000 calorie per day diet. As a general rule of thumb, aim for less than 5% for nutrients you want to limit, such as sodium and saturated fat. Aim for 20% or more for nutrients you want to get more of such as fiber, vitamin D, calcium and iron.

“Net carbs” and Other Nutrient Claim Meanings

You've probably seen the term "net carbs" on some food packages. Many food companies make claims about the amount of carbohydrate in their products. However, “net carbs” doesn't have a legal definition from the FDA, and they are not used by the American Diabetes Association. Always look at the Total Carbohydrate on the Nutrition Facts label first. Checking your blood sugar can help you figure out how specific carbs affect you.

Net carbs isn't the only confusing nutrition claim you'll find on food packages. For example, have you ever wondered what the difference is between fat free,

saturated fat free, low fat and reduced and less fat? The government has defined some claims that can be used on food packaging. Here's what they mean:

Calories

- **Calories free:** less than 5 calories per serving
- **Low calorie:** 40 calories or less per serving

Total, saturated, and trans fat

- **Fat free:** less than 0.5 grams of fat
- **Saturated fat free:** less than 0.5 grams of saturated fat
- **Trans fat free:** less than 0.5 grams of trans fat
- **Low fat:** 3 grams or less of total fat
- **Low saturated fat:** 1 gram or less of saturated fat
- **Reduced fat or less fat:** at least 25% less fat than the regular version

Sodium

- **Sodium free or salt free:** less than 5 mg of sodium per serving
- **Very low sodium:** 35 mg of sodium or less
- **Low sodium:** 140 mg of sodium or less
- **Reduced sodium or less sodium:** at least 25% less sodium than the regular version

Cholesterol

- **Cholesterol free:** less than 2 mg per serving
- **Low cholesterol:** 20 mg or less
- **Reduced cholesterol or less cholesterol:** at least 25% less cholesterol than the regular version

Sugar

- **Sugar free:** less than 0.5 grams of sugar per serving
- **Reduced sugar:** at least 25% less sugar per serving than the regular version
- **No sugar added or without added sugars:** no sugar or sugar-containing ingredient is added during processing

Fiber

- **High fiber:** 5 grams or more of fiber per serving
- **Good source of fiber:** 2.5 to 4.9 grams of fiber per serving

Source

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