

How to Read Food Labels and Know What is in Your Food

A trip to the supermarket is daunting at best with a grocery list, children in tow (or not), crowds, and the need to buy what is needed as quickly as possible. However, with the lack of knowledge or the confusion of mixed messages from the food industry, figuring out what is healthy or not can leave some of us with a “I don’t care” attitude. Furthermore, in 2016, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released the new food guidelines (related to nutrition facts labels) and the manufacturers must comply with them by July 26, 2018 (www.mayoclinic.org). So, how do consumers navigate the aisles and buy healthy foods? Will people adhere to the guidelines? That last question might be premature to ask if no one considers what I would call food label literacy.

Nutrition facts labels are required on all packages or containers to inform the consumers as to what foods or drinks contain. In addition, they become important for those consumers who may have chronic conditions such as diabetes or hypertension (or both). So, where do we begin once we are in the aisle, and ready to purchase what is on our list? Take the product and regardless of what it says in the front, the back of the package/container includes what consumers need to know. The nutrition fact label is divided into different sections. The first section lists the number of servings and the size of a single serving. For example, a box of rolled oats reads ½ cup and the total number of servings shows “about 30” (my box of rolled oats). As one continues to read the next fact, the calories per serving, consumers need to pay attention that if they double the serving size, they double the number of calories and that of nutrients. Personally, I doubt that increasing the size of the print (as the new guideline suggests) will change anything if a consumer does not see the relationship between portion control and calories consumed. As far as the “Calories from Fat” label, the FDA wants the words removed because the type of fat is more important than the calories from it. The consumption of the next section of nutrients (total of fats, cholesterol, sodium, and carbohydrates) should be limited not only by the average consumer but also individuals who follow restricted diets. Did you know that the daily intake for sodium is no more than 1,500mg (approximately 1teaspoon) for a 2,000-calorie diet? According to the American Heart Association, no more than 11-13 grams of saturated fat should be consumed. Does it make sense to see the sodium content at 800 mg, yet the calories per serving is only 190? Even if one does not know how to read a food label, start asking yourself questions. The added sugars that need to be included on the nutrition fact label according to the new guidelines, comprise of either sugar added in processed foods (such as cakes, pies, candy) or added by us in what we eat (for example, adding sugar to a bowl of cereals). However, will the inclusion affect consumers’ food choices? Only time will tell.

As part of the nutrition facts label, beneficial nutrients that are needed on a daily basis include: dietary fiber, protein, calcium, iron, and others. Last but not least, we have the % Daily Value (Percent Daily Value). As defined by the FDA, the “% DV reveals the percent of each nutrient in a single serving, in terms of the daily recommended amount. As a guide, choose foods with a 5% or less if you want to consume less of a nutrient. If you want to consume more of a nutrient, look for a %DV at 20 or higher.”

The last section of a nutrition fact label is the list of ingredients. As revealing as it can be to know which products are healthy or not to purchase, most consumers can't always tell if they contain sugar, salt, or fat and will rely on the length of the list (some of us have been told that any more than 5 ingredients, the product should not be purchased: however, this is not a standard). Even if we know that some sugars end in -ose (such as sucrose, which is table sugar), others may be disguised under corn syrup, artificial sweeteners, or sugar alcohols (such as xylitol). Fats become another issue if consumers want to know if trans fats are in that list (hint: look for "partially hydrogenated oil" and "hydrogenated oil"). For all intents and purposes, consumers should be aware and educate themselves.

We can only hope that the new food guidelines will cause a behavior change in consumers. Armed with this new tool, the next trip to a supermarket should be a cinch. To your health!

Sources:

<https://www.fda.gov>

<https://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015>

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/>

<http://www.mayoclinic.org>