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GENERAL WELLNESS

# READING BETWEEN FOOD LABEL LINES

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Very few Americans eat a diet free from packaged foods—which means most of us are chowing down on processed, or even ultra-processed, [foods](#) with some degree of regularity.

While the ideal (read: best for our bodies) diet is made up of foods *without* labels, such as whole fruits, veggies, eggs, grains, fresh seafood and fresh cuts of meat, we can pack a healthier dietary punch by studying the Nutrition Facts label on packaged foods we do eat.

“Paying attention to food nutrition labels is one of the best healthy eating habits we can form,” says Leslie Ely, a registered dietitian at Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare. “Our nutritional goals may vary from person to person, but we can all benefit from seeing a food’s ratio of healthy nutrients vs. additives or ingredients we’d do best to avoid.”

## What to Look for in Food Labels

So in honor of [National Nutrition Month](#) and the importance of making informed food choices, [Healthier 901](#) is uplifting a handful of hints to help you understand exactly what to look for on a food label:

### First Things First: Recognize Your Serving Size

Sad but true—the whole bag of chips is usually *not* a serving size. Ditto that for the carton of ice cream. The serving size on the Nutrition Facts label shows a measured amount of that item, which means this info is a great reference point for what’s considered a standard portion. If you eat two (or more) servings in a sitting, be sure to count double (or triple, etc.) the

calories and nutrients listed on the label. **Pro tip:** when comparing different foods to find the healthiest fit, check the serving sizes to ensure an accurate comparison.

## Next, Watch That Calorie Count

The number of calories we consume in a day directly affects our weight, which means it's important to notice how many calories are contained in each serving when feasting on packaged foods. Not sure how many total calories you should be aiming for each day? [Get your personalized daily calorie allowance](#) in under a minute!

## Scope Out “No” or “Slow” Nutrients

A packaged food's calorie count may be the key to its impact on our weight, but it's critical to remember that calories are only one piece in the healthy lifestyle puzzle. Most Americans overdo their daily intake of **sodium, saturated fat and added sugars**—which places us at a higher risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and stroke. Watch your consumption rates for these best-in-moderation nutrients, and beware of reduced-fat, low-fat or low-sugar product claims, as foods “reduced” in one area may contain extra salt or sugar to turbocharge taste. It's also important to check the ingredients list for [sugar's many code names](#). If you spy syrup, nectar, molasses, honey, or any ingredient ending in “ose” (e.g., fructose) in the mix, you've successfully sniffed out sugar in disguise.



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“Depending on our health goals, we can zero in on the parts of the food label that matter most for our nutritional needs,” says Ely. “Someone concerned with pre-diabetes may focus primarily on added sugars, while a person working to reduce high blood pressure might skip to a food's sodium content. The most important thing is to make the label work for you and support your personal dietary needs.”

## See if You're Getting Enough of The Good Stuff

Nutrition labels don't just highlight those nutrients we ought to enjoy in small doses—they also shine a spotlight on the healthy nutrients our body needs, such as **iron, potassium, calcium and vitamin D**. **Dietary fiber** is a biggie here, too, as it reduces our blood cholesterol levels and leaves us feeling full for longer periods of time (which, in turn, keeps snack attacks at bay!).

## Keep an Eye on % Daily Value

Finally, don't sleep on the % Daily Value (DV) outlined down the righthand side of every [Nutrition Facts label](#). This figure tells you what percentage of each nutrient is in a single serving based on the total recommended amount we should aim for each day. So, if a breakfast food contains 25% of our daily added sugars allowance and we eat two servings to kickstart the morning (read: 50% of our total target), we'll need to rein in our added sugars intake for the rest of the day.

Other hints for savvy nutritional navigation include reading a packaged food’s ingredients list before you take the plunge (hint: fewer ingredients = less processing, which is a good thing!) and, when dining out, leaning into healthier menu options.

**Pro tip:** opt for menu terms like broiled, grilled, roasted and steamed vs. fried, breaded, buttered and creamed.

Learning how to get the info we need from nutrition labels takes time—but understanding how those numbers directly impact our health is well worth the effort. By joining the [Healthier 901 movement](#), you can access free planning tools to help you achieve your nutritional goals, such as a customizable food tracker and 30-day healthy food habits challenge. Download the app and start eating for a healthier you at [healthier901.com](#).

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