

What you should know about food labels

Canadians have bought the argument that you are what you eat. More of us are concerned about nutrition than about several other key health issues. Unfortunately, we're not so sure about what makes up good nutrition, and what food packaging labels tell us on the subject. It's little wonder!

For example, consider the statement: "This product is a good source of food energy." Sounds like it should be particularly healthful, doesn't it? In fact, all it means is the item is high in calories. That may be fine, because we all need food energy. But eat too much of these products and you'll probably just gain unnecessary weight.

The fact is that people want to read the label on food, but they don't get as much out of it as they could," says Suzanne Hendricks, President of the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN). "They lack the tools to make use of the information that's there."

We now know considerably more about consumer attitudes towards labelling because of a ground-breaking study undertaken by the NIN, with co-operation from government ministries, several companies, and the Heart and Stroke Foundation. It found that fewer than half of consumers surveyed could provide accurate definitions for manufacturers' claims, such as "low in fat."

For instance, fully seven out of ten consumers who were surveyed believed that a "no-cholesterol" claim meant that the food contained less fat. This, of course, isn't the case.

In the study, more than 800 shoppers from five cities across Canada were surveyed [in the fall of 1991] to determine the importance they placed on nutrition, their knowledge and use of nutrition labelling, and what changes they would like to see. Further discussions were held [last] spring with 150 shoppers.

The data collected indicated clearly that nutrition is important to consumers. But they're not fully satisfied with

existing food label formats. Complexity and lack of clarity are their biggest complaints. What shoppers would like, according to the NIN study, is clear, standardized presentation with bigger and brighter print.

In Canada, nutrition labelling guidelines have existed for some years. And although it's not mandatory, many producers incorporate nutrition labelling into their packaging as a service to consumers. The format is as follows:

- the heading "Nutrition Information;"
- the serving size, which may be in grams, millilitres, or a "household" measure such as a cup or package; and,
- the core list of ingredients, comprising energy value (per serving) in calories and kilojoules, and the amount of protein, fat, and carbohydrates in grams per serving.

Other nutrients may be listed (at the manufacturer's option) in this order:

- under "fat": fatty acid groups (that is, polyunsaturates, monounsaturates, and saturates) and cholesterol;
- under "carbohydrates": sugars, starch and dietary fibre;
- following the core list: sodium and potassium; and,
- following the sodium and potassium: vitamins and minerals, expressed as a percentage of the Recommended Daily Intake.

Ingredients are always listed in descending order of quantity, starting with the largest. To help you sort out what the claims on the label

really mean, [review] the accompanying chart. To ensure you're buying healthy foods, look for products that are lower in fat and salt and higher in dietary fibre.

Much of the information consumers need to buy wisely and eat well is already available. It's simply a matter of learning how to use it.

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Here's how to read your food labels

- **Calorie-free** - Contains no more than 1 calorie per 100 g
- **Calorie-reduced** - Contains 50% fewer calories than the regular version
- **Low-calorie** - Contains 15 calories or less per serving
- **Low in sugar** - No more than 2 g of sugar per serving
- **No sugar added/unsweetened** - May contain naturally present sugar, but has no sugar added
- **Sugar-free** - No more than 0.25 g of sugar per 100 g; no more than 1 calorie/100 g
- **Source of energy** - Contains at least 100 calories per serving
- **Cholesterol-free** - No more than 3 mg of cholesterol per 100 g, and must meet the standard for "low in saturated fatty acids" (see below)
- **Fat-free** - No more than 0.1 g of fat /100 g
- **Low in cholesterol** - No more than 20 mg of cholesterol per serving, and must meet the standard for "low in saturated fatty acids" (see below)
- **Low in fat** - no more than 3 g of fat per serving
- **Low in saturated fatty acids** - No more than 2 g of saturated fatty acids per serving; no more than 15% of total energy derived from saturated fatty acids
- **"Lean" ground beef** - Maximum 17% fat content
- **"Medium" ground beef** - Maximum 23% fat content
- **"Regular" ground beef** - Maximum 30% fat content
- **Source of dietary fibre** - At least 2 g of fibre per serving
- **High source of dietary fibre** - At least 4 g of fibre per serving
- **Very high source of dietary fibre** - At least 6 g of fibre per serving
- **Low sodium** - Contains 50% less sodium than the regular product; no more than 40 mg of sodium per 100 g; no salt added
- **No added salt/unsalted** - No salt added, and none of the ingredients contain a large quantity of salt
- **Salt-free/Sodium-free** - Contains no more than 5 mg of sodium per 100 g