

York University Staff Association Health and Wellness News and Views.

To make healthy food choices; we need to understand what is in the food we eat. 20 years ago it was very unlikely to come across a story about nutrition in the news. Today a day doesn't go by when the media isn't reporting on health, diet and fitness. Yet surprisingly, our knowledge of nutrition has only increased marginally. According to Statistics Canada, the majority of Canadians don't meet food-guide requirements for fruit, vegetables and dairy products. Recent studies have shown that one-half of adults and one-quarter of children in Canada are overweight. Where are we going wrong?

Information overload and lack of time are among the most common barriers to living a healthy lifestyle. Although on a positive note, something's have changed. Today, we are far more aware of trans-fat, the difference between good and bad fats, and sodium than we were a decade ago. While the internet provides us with a wealth of health and diet information, most people turn to food labels to get their nutrition facts. However the amount of info all jumbled together on a tiny food label can appear to be very confusing and complicated. What are all of these nutrients? Which ones should be high? Which ones should be low?? Which should I eat and which should I avoid all together???

If you have ever turned over your food package and asked any of these questions, hopefully the following tips will help you avoid common food label reading blunders.

Serving Size This is one of the most important pieces of info on the label because all of the nutrition information is based on the exact amount. If a package says a serving size is $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, it's best to actually measure some out to get a clear idea of how much that is; as it's very easy to underestimate the amount we're actually eating. When it comes to snack foods, you might want to separate a larger package into smaller bags with the correct serving size.

Calories This represents the total number of calories in exactly 1 serving. Calories are energy. So it is really quite simple: If you consume more calories than your body needs for energy than you will gain weight. If you consume fewer calories than your body needs for energy you will lose weight.

Fats There are often anywhere from 1-4 types of fat on a food label. Paying attention to the good (unsaturated fat) is important. There are two types of unsaturated fats—polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats.

These fats typically come from vegetables or fish sources. They supply the body with a healthy source of fat. Saturated fat and trans- fats are chemically altered fats that are man-made by the process of hydrogenation. This means that they often have a longer shelf life. One thing few people will debate is how bad trans-fat is. Being a major contributor to obesity and heart disease, this is the fat you want to avoid completely.

Carbohydrates The grams of total carbohydrate are the first thing to look at. If it's very high, you can almost always put that food right back on the shelf. Even if the carbohydrates are coming from a "good" source, too much carbohydrate at once will shoot blood glucose levels up. The exact amount that is "too much" for you will depend on your own body's ability to tolerate glucose, and the particular diet you choose. Beneath the Total Carbohydrates line there will be a few other lines including:

Dietary fiber: This figure represents the number of grams of fiber in each serving.

Sugars: This figure represents the number of grams of added sweeteners, which may appear in the ingredients list as: sugar, corn syrup, honey, brown sugar, etc.

Other carbohydrates: This line reveals the number of grams of complex carbohydrates, not including fiber. Theoretically, this number should reflect the amount of the more nutritious sugars, that is the ones naturally present in the food.

Protein, (usually the last nutrient on the list). Protein plays an important role in muscle, cell, organ, and gland function therefore making it a nutrient that you certainly won't mind seeing a high number next to. Foods such as lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs, legumes, nuts and low-fat dairy food will be high in protein. One of protein's key benefits is that it usually leaves you feeling satisfied longer than carbohydrates do, so you eat less.

These are the most common and important nutritional facts listed on most food labels. So remember to read next time you shop for groceries. Reading food labels is an essential skill when you are trying to make healthy choices. Hopefully some of these tips will help support you in your nutritional goals.

Strive for progress, not perfection.-unknown

Kerrienne Brown

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