



What's on a Label?



Session Overview

In this session, participants will learn how to read food labels and use this information to select healthier foods. An educator will provide an overview of the information and nutrient listings found on food labels. Class participants will practice label reading by looking at food packages. The group will discuss what information is most useful to them and how they will use label reading to make healthier food choices.

Target Audience: English and Spanish speaking adults

Group Size: 5-30 participants

Time Needed: 30 – 45 minutes

Behavioral Objectives:

After the session participants will be able to:

1. Name three items listed on the Nutrition Facts label.
2. State at least 2 reasons it is important to read the food label when shopping for food.
3. Use the food label to choose a cereal that is high in fiber and a snack food low in sodium.

Key Message:

Individuals can use the food label to make healthier food choices and to compare the nutritional content of similar foods.

Materials Needed for Session:

- Primary handouts: USDA Team Nutrition *Read It Before You Eat It* mini poster; FDA *Side-By-Side Comparison*; FDA *Food Serving Sizes Get a Reality Check*; USDA 10 Tips 3 tip sheets: *Salt & Sodium, Make Half Your Grains Whole, Cut Back on Your Kid's Sweet Treats*; sample cereal label
- Sample nutrition labels including cereal boxes, bread packages, dairy product labels, snack food packages, ramen noodle package, canned food, 100% juice and fruit-flavored drink nutrition labels, etc.
- Cereal, bowls, measuring cups, teaspoon
- Optional: USDA Team Nutrition *Read It Before You Eat It* poster; FDA *Side-By-Side Comparison* poster; *NEOP Flavors of My Kitchen* cookbook

Outline of 45-minute session: (30-minute session in italics)

- Welcome and introduction to “What’s on a Label?” (3 min) (2 min)
- Activity 1: Serving Size and Servings per Container (5 min) (4 min)
- Activity 2: Nutrition Numbers (14 min) (10 min)
- Activity 3: Ingredient List & Front of Package Information (5 min) (3 min)
- Activity 4: Practice Reading Food Labels (10 min) (7 min)
- Activity 5: Using the Food Label to Find Healthier Foods (3 min) (2 min)
- Conclusion and Evaluation (5 min) (3 min)

Welcome to “What’s on a Label?” (3 min)

1. Welcome and introduce the class topic (*If teaching this class as a series, review the past class and home activities.*)
2. Review the class objectives and the key message. Ask the following questions:
 - How many of you read food labels when you shop for food?
 - Who can tell me what is on a food label? *Calories, fat, fiber, etc.*
 - Why is it important to read food labels? *Make healthy food choices, compare similar foods, find out what is in different foods, etc.*

Today we will start a two-part class to help you make healthier food and beverage choices. In part one, we will discuss how to read food labels and in part two, we will discuss beverages. (*Distribute the handouts.*)

The Nutrition Facts label will be updated over the next 2 years. Since you will probably begin to see the new label along with the current label, we will use the *Side-By-Side Comparison* handout to highlight the changes.

Activity 1: Serving Size and Servings per Container (5 min)

We will start at the top of the Nutrition Facts label and then go through each section. Who can tell me the first thing listed on a food label? Look in the **orange** section of the *Read It poster* and *handout*. Serving size and number of servings per container are listed first.

- What is the serving size for this food? *1 cup*
- How many servings are in the package? *2*

This information is on all Nutrition Facts labels. The serving size text is larger and in bold on the new label, making it easier to see. Let’s take a closer look at serving size.

Activity: I need one volunteer.

- Please pour the amount of cereal you would normally eat into this bowl.
- Read the serving size listed on the cereal box and pour that amount into this bowl.
- Compare the amount of cereal you typically eat to the serving size listed on the label.
- Estimate the number of calories in the amount of cereal you poured to the calories in one serving.

The serving size for some foods has been updated to reflect what people usually eat and drink today. For example, currently 1 serving of ice cream is ½ cup. This will change to 2/3 cup. (Refer to the *Food Serving Sizes Get a Reality Check* handout.)

Activity 2: Nutrition Numbers (14 min)

Now we will review calories, nutrients and other sections of the Nutrition Facts label.

1. **Calories:** Look below the orange section at the **white** section.

The calories and nutrient content listed on the label is for one serving. If you eat two servings, you need to double the calories and nutrient values listed.

- If you eat 1 serving of this food (1 cup), how many calories have you eaten? *250*
- If you eat the whole package (2 cups), how many calories have you eaten? *500*

Sometimes we may eat a whole package of food not knowing how many servings it contains. Many packages contain more than one serving. So, next time think twice before you eat the whole package.

The calories section on the new label is much larger and in bold. Calories from fat are no longer on the label because the new focus is on the type of fat.

2. **Nutrients:** Now we will look at the blue and purple sections of the Nutrition Facts label. How do we know if a food is high or low in the nutrients listed? Look at the % Daily Value. 5% or less is low and 20% or more is high.

a. **Nutrients to GET LESS of:** We want to get less of the items listed in the **blue** section. The percentage to the right of these nutrients should be 5% or less. This means the food is low in those nutrients. If you see 20% or more, the food is high in those nutrients.

i. **Fat & Cholesterol:**

- What nutrients do you see listed? *Total fat, saturated fat, trans fat & cholesterol*
- Do you see any nutrients with 5% or less? *No*
- Do you see any nutrients with 20% or more? *Total fat is close; it has 18%. This means this food provides you with 18% of the total fat you need for the whole day.*
- Fat provides flavor to food, helps you feel full and helps absorb some vitamins. However, we only need a small amount.
- Limiting your intake of saturated fat and trans fat may reduce your risk for certain chronic diseases such as heart disease and some cancers.

ii. **Sodium:**

If you look just below the blue section you will see sodium in the **white** section. We also want to limit the amount of sodium we eat because sodium plays a role in high blood pressure. If you look you at the top of the **Salt and Sodium** handout you will see we should reduce our sodium intake to less than 2,300 mg* per day which is about 1 teaspoon (*show a teaspoon*).

- What percent do you see to the right of sodium? *20%*
- Is this high or low? *High - So we know this food is high in sodium.*
- How many milligrams of sodium does one serving of the food on the poster provide? *470 mg*
- How many milligrams of sodium do two servings of this food provide? *940 mg – almost half of the sodium we need for the whole day!*
- The **Salt and Sodium** handout provides tips to reduce our sodium intake. Can someone please read tips 2, 3, and 7?

***Note:** *USDA Read It poster and handout are outdated (2,400 mg).*

iii. **Sugars:**

If you look just below fiber you will see sugars. This includes both natural and added sugars.

- Natural sugar is found in fruits, dairy and grains. Added sugar is found in foods like cookies cakes, ice cream, sweetened drinks and other foods.
- Currently, added sugar is not separated from “natural” sugar on the Nutrition Facts label; it is listed in the ingredient list.
- Does this food have added sugar? We do not know because the ingredient list is not on this poster or handout. We would have to read the ingredient list to check if this food has added sugar.

- On the new label, added sugars are listed separate from total sugars. This helps us to easily figure out if a food has added sugars without having to look at the ingredient list.
 - Also, the label will identify the maximum amount of sugar and individual should eat in one day. It is recommended that we get no more than 10% of our calories per day from added sugars. For the average adult, this is 50 grams per day or about 12 teaspoons.¹
 - The *Sweet Treats* handout provides tips on how to limit added sugars. Can someone please read tips 1, 2 and 8?
- b. **Nutrients to GET ENOUGH of:** We want to get enough of the items in the **purple** section. These are nutrients we need so we want the percent to be 20% or more.
- What nutrients do you see in the purple section? *Dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron*
 - Do you see any nutrients with 20% or more? *Yes – calcium*
 - Do you see any nutrients with 5% or less? *Yes – fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C and iron. So this food is a good source of calcium but not vitamin A & C, iron and fiber.*
 - The 4 nutrients listed at the bottom will change on the new label.
 - Vitamin D and potassium are now required because Americans do not always get enough. Vitamins A and C are no longer required since deficiencies are rare today.
 - Iron and calcium are still required.
 - Actual amounts must be listed for vitamin D, calcium, iron and potassium.

Fiber: Let's take a closer look at fiber. Look at the top of the *Make Half Your Grains Whole* handout. This lists examples of whole grains.

- How many grams of fiber are in 1 serving? *0 g; 0%*
- Do you think this is a whole grain? *No, a whole grain would have fiber.*
- The handout provides tips to increase fiber. Can someone please read these tips 1, 10 and 8?

Activity: Now that you have looked at the Nutrition Facts label on the *Read It* poster, can you guess what food it is? Remember it is high in total fat and sodium but it is also high in calcium. *Macaroni and Cheese*

Activity 3: Ingredient List and Front of Package Information (5 min)

Now let's look at the front of the food package and the ingredient list.

1. **Front of package:** If you look at the front of a food package you may see different terms and claims. For example, if you look at the front of this cereal box (*use one from the kit*) you will see it claims to be "whole grain".
 - Do you think this cereal is a good source of whole grains? *Maybe; it may contain a little or a lot but we need to look at the fiber percent and ingredient list to make sure.*
 - What are some other terms and claims you may have seen on food packages?
 - Nutrient content claims: *"low sodium", "low fat", "100% juice", "gluten-free"*
 - Health claims: *"Heart healthy", "Helps lower cholesterol", "Boosts immunity"*

- Fat-free or low-fat does not mean calorie-free. Lower fat items may have as many calories as the full-fat versions. Read the label.
2. **Ingredient list:** The ingredient list may be harder to find. It is usually on the side or back of a food package and is usually in small print.
- a. Ingredients are listed in order from most to least. When an ingredient is close to the top of the list, the food is high in that ingredient.
 - b. You may have heard of some ingredients and there are some you may have never heard of and can't pronounce. Processed foods may have ingredients you have not heard of like preservatives, added colorings, added flavorings and more.
 - c. Let's look at the ingredient list of this sample cereal label. (*Distribute laminated cereal Nutrition Facts labels*)
 - Do you see any ingredients you have never heard of or can't pronounce? *Partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, whey, annatto extract, BHT*
 - Is this a whole grain? *Yes – the first ingredient is corn and the second ingredient is whole wheat.*
 - Does it have added sugar? *Yes – sugar, brown sugar, corn syrup, malted corn and barley syrup and honey are listed in the ingredient list.*

Activity 4: Practice Reading Food Labels (10 min)

Now we are going to practice reading food labels. Some of you brought food packages from home. I also have a box of food packages you can choose from. I want to make sure everyone has one or two food packages. Please stand up (or raise your hand) if the following describes your food:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| • Serving Size = 1 cup | • Vitamin C = 20% or more |
| • Serving Size = less than 1 cup | • Calcium = 20% or more |
| • Servings Per Container = 2 or more | • Iron = 5% or less |
| • Calories = 300 or less | • A whole grain |
| • Total Fat = 5% or less | • Has added sugar |
| • Sodium = 20% or more | • Has an ingredient I can't pronounce |
| • Dietary Fiber = 20% or more | • Has 5 or less ingredients |
| • Vitamin A = 5% or less | • Has a health claim |

As you can see, we have a wide variety of foods with different nutrients and different ingredients. We can use this information to compare foods or brands to make healthier food choices. For example, some snack foods, such as chips, have more fat but less sodium than other snack foods, such as pretzels and crackers. So, it is up to you if you want to choose the snack with less fat or the snack with less sodium.

Activity 5: Using the food label to find healthier foods (3 min)

In small groups or in pairs, discuss the following questions:

1. What items on the food label are most helpful to you?
2. What food label are you going to read before you buy the item next time?

Conclusion and Evaluation (5 min)

Get the most nutrition for your calories. Compare the calories to the nutrients you would get. If you are getting a lot of calories, you should be getting a lot of nutrients.

Home Activities:

1. Read at least two cereal box labels and the label on two of your favorite snack foods during your next trip to the grocery store.
2. Go to the FDA website or search on the internet for “eat for a healthy heart FDA consumer update video” to get links for videos and handouts that have additional information about food labels.

Evaluation:

- Do you have any questions?
- Let’s review. (*Distribute evaluation forms or conduct verbally.*)

What’s on a Label?

After attending this class I feel confident that I can:

	Agree Very Much	Agree	I Am Not Sure	Disagree	Disagree Very Much
1. Name 3 items listed on the Nutrition Facts label.					
2. State at least 2 reasons it is important to read the food label when shopping for food.					
3. Use the food label to choose a cereal that is high in fiber and a snack food low in sodium.					

Closing:

Thanks for attending the class and I hope you are now able to use the information on a food label to make healthier choices.

If part of a series of classes:

Now we will take a closer look at some of your favorite beverages by reading the labels and comparing portion sizes.

References:

¹ Shifts Needed to Align with Healthy Eating Patterns, 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, Chapter 2, pg. 54; https://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/resources/2015-2020_Dietary_Guidelines.pdf

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