Nutrition Facts Labels

Nutrition Facts labels, which can be found on most food items, are an important resource for consumers. Thanks to Nutrition Facts labels, we get easy-to-read and consistent tables to enable us to quickly find the information we need to maintain a healthy diet. On the labels of each food, we can find information on the amount per serving of saturated fat, cholesterol, dietary fiber, and other nutrients. We can easily see nutrient reference values, expressed as “% Daily Values,” which help us to see how foods fit into an overall diet and standardized serving sizes that make nutritional comparisons of similar products easier. The percent daily values tell us how much of a daily allowance the food provides for a specific nutrient. The daily values are based on an adult’s needs, not a child’s. This is important to note because children may need more or less of certain nutrients depending on their age and size.

Fats, cholesterol, and sodium are listed on the Nutrition Facts label. These nutrients should be consumed in limited amounts. Nutrients such as potassium, fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron are also listed. We need to make sure we get enough of these. One good rule to follow is the 5/20 rule, which involves checking the daily value percentages of foods. For nutrients we want less of such as cholesterol and fat, we should choose foods with a low daily value (5% or less). For nutrients we want more of (such as calcium, fiber, iron, and vitamins A and C), we should choose foods with a high daily value (20% or more). By following the 5/20 rule, we can ensure that we are eating the foods that give us the nutrients we need.

- **Check servings and calories.** Look at the serving size and how many servings the package contains. If you consume one serving, the label clearly outlines the nutrients you get. If you double the servings you eat, you double the calories and nutrients, including the % DV.
- **Don’t sugar-coat it.** Since sugars contribute calories with few, if any, nutrients, look for foods and beverages low in added sugars. Read the ingredient list and make sure that added sugars are not one of the first few ingredients. Some names for added sugars (caloric sweeteners) include sucrose, glucose, high-fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, maple syrup, and fructose.
- **Know your fats.** Look for foods low in saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol to help reduce the risk of heart disease (5% DV or less is low, 20% DV or more is high). Most of the fats you eat should be polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Keep total fat intake between 20% to 35% of calories per day.
- **Reduce sodium (salt), increase potassium.** Research shows that eating less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium (about 1 tsp of salt) per day might reduce the risk of high blood pressure. Most of the sodium people eat comes from processed foods, not from the salt shaker. Also, look for foods high in potassium (e.g., tomatoes, bananas, potatoes, and orange juice) which counteracts some of sodium’s effects on blood pressure.

(Sources: USDA, U.S. Department of HHS, NIH, www.kidshealth.org)