

# DECIPHERING NUTRITION LABELS

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In the fast paced world, time is money and in order to save time today's youth relies heavily on packaged food. Not only youth, most of us are spending more and more of our grocery bills on packaged foods. It's time that we should know what we're consuming. The easiest way to do that is to be able to read what food label says. Reading these labels and understanding the information would help consumers in making healthier choices. This article aims at educating people in making quick and informed choice while consuming packaged food.

One should start first with understanding the "**Serving Size**". The serving size and the number of servings per container are written at the top of the label. Serving sizes differ on each food label and may not equal the serving size we normally eat. If we eat twice the serving size listed on the label, we need to double all the figures in the nutritional facts section.

**Calories Per Serving:** This section on the label tells us about the total number of calories in each serving of the food and the number of those calories which are derived from fat. Calories provide us a measure of how much energy we get from eating one serving of the food. If we are trying to manage (lose, gain or maintain) our weight, the number of calories we consume, mat-

ters a lot. For example, one serving of macaroni and cheese may provide 250 calories, with 110 calories from fat. If we eat 2 servings, we would consume 500 calories in total and out of this 220 would be from fat.

**Total Fat:** It includes fats that are good for us, such as monounsaturated, polyunsaturated and omega-3 fats (usually from liquid and plant sources, such as canola oil and nuts) and fats that are not so good, such as saturated and trans fats (from animal or vegetable sources). Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats can help lower our blood cholesterol and protect your heart. Trans fats are also known as "hydrogenated" and "partially hydrogenated" fats. These are formed during the process of converting liquid oils into solid fats, such as shortening and stick margarine. Hydrogenation increases the shelf life and stabilizes the flavour of these fats. Partially hydrogenated fats are currently considered the worst fats for our health.

## Nutrients to Limit

**Sodium:** It is also known as table salt. Sodium is a hidden ingredient in many

foods, especially processed food, such as canned soups and tomato sauces.

**Cholesterol:** This tells us how much cholesterol we will get by eating one serving of the food. There are two types of cholesterol – HDL (High Density Lipoprotein), known as the "good" cholesterol and LDL (Low Density Lipoprotein), the "bad" cholesterol.

**Total Carbohydrates**

: This figure represents the sum total of all the different types of carbohydrates that we consume by eating one serving of the food.

## Nutrients to Moderate

**Sugar:** This is the amount of sugar we consume through one serving of food. Some carbohydrates convert into sugar in our body, so we may be consuming more sugar than what is on the label.

## Get Enough of These Nutrients

**Fibre:** Fibre content tells us no. of grams of dietary fibre in one serving of

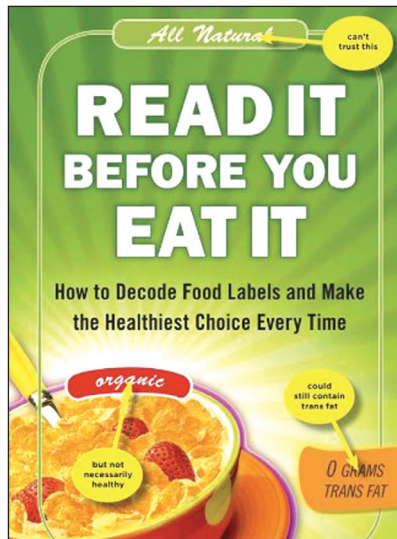
the food. Dietary Fibre is the indigestible portion of plant food.

**Protein:** It is an important macronutrient for building muscle. High-protein foods tend to be more satiating. The Institute of Medicine recommends getting 10%-35% of our calories from protein. Most of the people do not calculate the amount of protein they consume. It is therefore, important to check the food label to track the amount of protein per serving.

**Vitamins & Minerals:** This portion of nutrition shows what percentages of the recommended daily intake of these nutrients are in the food. This information is given in terms of percentage. If a glass of tetra pack juice we gulped claims to contain '100 per cent of our recommended daily intake of Vitamin C,' it may not necessarily be so. Those recommended intakes are based on a specific diet. It also doesn't take into account our lifestyle: the more active we are, the higher our nutrient craving will be. Mostly, they list the percentage of vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium and iron. Only some labels have more number of vitamins and minerals listed.

## Information at the Bottom of the Label

This chart is based on a 2,000-calorie diet. The information is dietary advice from public health experts and is the same for all products. It shows the



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upper and lower limits for each nutrient based on a 2,000-calorie diet. Let us take an example of macaroni and cheese. One serving would provide 18 per cent of the Daily Value of the possible 100 per cent Daily Value for our total fat intake. The remaining 82 per cent could be consumed from other sources for that day. If we eat two servings, 36 per cent of our Daily Value for fat would be taken care of and the remaining 64 per cent can be consumed from other sources.

### Vegetarian or non-vegetarian food

A red circle indicates the presence of non-vegetarian ingredients in the food item, while a green circle indicates that the food item is suitable for vegetarians.

The Vegetarian and non-vegetarian logo is placed near the product name so that consumer can easily identify the product.

- The size of the logo depends upon the size of the product. The size of the logo i.e. the diameter of the circle and side of the square are in accordance to the size of the label.
- The package of "Non Vegetarian" food always have a symbol of a brown colour filled circle having a specified diameter inside a square with brown outline.

### Best before

It is the date on the label that indicates the end of the period in which the condition of the food, under storage, will remain as stated. After this date the food may still be safe to consume but the quality would have deteriorated. However, the food product will not be sold after the 'best before' date if it becomes unsafe for the consumer. Similarly, "Use by date" or "Recommended last consumption date" or "Expiry date" is the date on the label that indicates the estimated end of the stated storage period after which the condition of food will probably not have the quality and safety attributes normally expected by the consumers and the food shall not be sold.

### Unhealthy food items

These are the main reason the world is fatter and sicker than ever before. Some of these items are mentioned below:

#### Most Commercial Salad Dressings:

Vegetables are phenomenally healthy but often they don't taste very good on their own. That's why many people use dressings to add flavour to their salads, turning these bland meals into delicious treats. However, many salad dressings are loaded with unhealthy ingredients like sugar, vegetable oils and trans fats, along with a bunch of artificial chemicals. Eating vegetables with a dressing high in harmful ingredients will totally negate health benefits that we may get from the salad. We should preferably make our own dressings using healthy ingredients.

**Fruit Juices:** A lot of people believe fruit juices to be healthy as they come from fruit. However, most of the fruit juices that we find in the supermarket are not really fruit juices. They are basically just liquid sugar. Sometimes there isn't even any actual fruit in there. These have just chemicals that taste like fruit. What we're drinking is basically just fruit-flavored sugar water. It is generally said, even if we're drinking 100% quality fruit juice, it is still a bad idea. Fruit juice is like fruit, with all its good stuff (like the fibre) taken out. It actually contains a similar amount of sugar as a sugar-sweetened beverage.

**Whole Wheat:** Most "whole wheat" products aren't really made from whole wheat. The grains are pulverized into

very fine flour, making them raise blood sugar just as fast as their refined counterparts. In fact, whole wheat bread can have a similar glycemic index as white bread.

### Processed "Low-Fat" and "Fat-Free" Foods:

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1/2 cup (114g) Servings Per Container 4	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 50	Calories from Fat 30
<b>Total Fat</b> 3g	<b>% Daily Value*</b>
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 300mg	13%
Total Carbohydrate 13g	4%
Dietary Fiber 3g	12%
Sugars 3g	
Protein 3g	
Vitamin A 270%	Vitamin C 10%
Calcium 2%	Iron 4%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.	
	Calories 2,000 2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g 80g
Sat Fat	Less than 20g 30g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	Less than 300g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g

processed food manufacturers jumped on the bandwagon and started removing the fat from foods. But the food tastes horrible when the fat is removed. In order to improve the taste, a whole bunch of sugar is added to compensate. Saturated fat is harmless, but added sugar is incredibly harmful when consumed in excess. The words **low-fat** or **fat-free** on a packaging usually mean that it is a highly processed product that is loaded with sugar.

**Margarine:** Butter was demonized back in the day, due to the high saturated fat content. Various health experts started promoting margarine instead. Earlier, the margarine used to be high in trans fats. These days, it has less trans fats than before but is still loaded with refined vegetable oils. Margarine is also not food as it is an assembly of chemicals and refined oils that have been made to look and taste like food. If we want to improve our health, we should eat real butter and avoid processed margarine.

**Sports Drinks:** Sports drinks were designed with athletes in mind. These drinks contain electrolytes (salts) and sugar, which can be useful for athletes in many cases. However, most regular people don't need any additional salts, and they certainly have no need for liquid sugar. Although often considered "less bad" than sugary soft drinks, there is really no fundamental difference except that the sugar content is sometimes slightly lower. It is important to stay hydrated, especially around workouts, but most people will be better off sticking to plain water.

**Low-Carb Junk Foods:** Low carb diets have been incredibly popular for many decades now. However, food manufacturers have caught up on the trend and brought various low-carb "friendly" processed foods to the market. This includes highly processed junk foods like the different energy bars. If you take a look at the ingredients list, you see that there is no real food in there, just chemicals and highly refined ingredients. These products can be consumed occasionally without compromising the metabolic adaptation that comes with low-carb eating. But they don't really nourish our body, even though they're technically low-carb, they're still unhealthy.

**Processed Organic Food:** Food manufacturers have found all sorts of ways to make the same junk, except with ingredients that happen to be organic. This includes ingredients like organic raw cane sugar, which is basically

100% identical to regular sugar. It's still just glucose and fructose, with little to no nutrients. In many cases, the difference between an ingredient and its organic counterpart is next to none. Processed foods that happen to be labelled organic are not necessarily

healthy. Always check the label to see what's inside.

**Vegetable Oils:** We are often advised to eat seeds and vegetable oils. This includes soybean oil, canola oil and numerous others. This is based on the fact that these oils have been shown to lower blood cholesterol levels, at least in the short term. However, it's important to keep in mind that blood cholesterol is a risk factor, not a disease in itself. Even though vegetable oils can improve a risk factor, there is no guarantee that they will help prevent actual hard end points like heart attacks or death, which is what really counts. In fact, several controlled trials have shown that despite lowering cholesterol, these oils can increase the risk of death from both heart disease and cancer. It is therefore, advisable to eat healthy, natural fats like butter, coconut oil and olive oil, but avoid processed vegetable oils.

**Most Processed Breakfast Cereals:** Some breakfast cereals are marketed by using terms like "whole grain" or "low fat." But, when we actually look at the ingredients list, we see that it's almost nothing but refined grains, sugar and artificial chemicals.

### Some more facts about food labels: Natural Flavours

It's important to note that both artificial flavours as well as natural flavours have chemicals. In natural flavours, the chemicals have to be derived from a plant or an animal whereas artificial flavours are derived from inedible sources. So natural flavour extracts also have a complicated chemical makeup, but they are more or less identical to the natural flavouring.

**Stabilizers and Thickeners:** These are added to improve and stabilize the texture of foods. These are found in jellies, ready-to-eat foods, desserts, frozen foods and salad dressings and they neither stabilize our health nor preserve it. They are used to maintain the consistency of the food.

**Preservatives:** Preservatives prevent

the growth of microbes such as bacteria or moulds in foods during storage. They are used to make the food last longer on the grocery shelf. Eg, Sodium nitrate and sodium nitrite are used as food preservatives. These chemical compounds are hidden in bacon, ham, hot dogs and all processed meat.

**High Fructose Corn Syrup:** High fructose Corn syrup is found in ketchup bottles, biscuits, baked goods, dairy products, carbonated drinks. It is an artificial sweetener made from corn. It's popular because it is sweeter than sugar, is relatively cheaper, and helps in preserving the food longer.

**Colouring Agents:** Food colouring or colour additive is a pigment or substance that adds colour to your food to make it more appealing. Even though synthetic colors do not add to the nutritive value of the foods, they are frequently added to restore the natural color lost on food processing. Due to health concerns of chemical dyes, some natural food dyes are now being used like beta-carotene, chlorophyll, saffron, curcumin (turmeric) etc. These maybe extracted from natural sources or produced synthetically. Both artificial flavours as well as natural flavours have chemicals.

**Emulsifiers:** These are a group of substances that are used to obtain a stable mixture of liquids that would not mix or separate quickly. Emulsifiers are food additives found in salad dressings, margarine, mayonnaise etc. These are indicated as alphabet E followed by a number. Some of them are of animal origin like E120 (Cochineal : a red colour obtained from female insects), E441 (Gelatin : derived from the bones and/ or hides of cattle and/ or pigs), E542 (Edible Bone Phosphate : an extract from animal bones), E904 (Shellac : a resin from the lac insect).

**Artificial Sweeteners:** Artificial sweeteners are synthetic sugar substitutes but may be derived from naturally occurring substances, or they could be synthetic. They are widely used in processed foods, including baked goods, soft drinks, candy, puddings, canned foods, jams and jellies, dairy products etc. Some examples are Saccharin, Aspartame, Acesulfame-K, Sucralose, Neotame, Glycerol, Erythritol, Maltitol, Lactitol, etc.

**MSG or Monosodium Glutamate:** It is used as a flavor enhancer and is found in salad dressings, ready-to-eat soups, canned vegetables and chips. It has been known to cause various side-effects like headaches, allergic reactions, nausea etc. Internationally, it is recognized as a food additive. Though in small quantities it may not harm us but experts say that it is best to avoid it.

### Conclusion

Deciphering of nutritional facts on the packaged food labels is, therefore, of utmost importance for our health and well being. This can help us to effectively and efficiently select food items and choose between products. So be a smart consumer and live a healthy life!

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