

## How to decode the nutrition label

Source: [SunLife](#)

"Low-fat" yogurt. "Whole-grain" bread. "Reduced-sodium" soup. "Low-cholesterol" cooking oil. Confused by nutrition labels and claims? Here's how to read between the lines.

The average grocery store sells more than 20,000 products. With so many tempting labels and claims vying for your attention, how do you know if a product is actually good for you, or just sounds healthy to get you to throw it in your shopping cart?

According to Health Canada, about 70% of Canadian consumers view food labels as an important source of nutrition information. After the Internet, labels are their second-favourite source of information. But reading the label doesn't always mean understanding it. In a 2012 Nielsen Global Survey of Food Labeling Trends, only 49% of Canadian respondents reported "mostly" understanding the information on labels. Many felt that a bit of mathematical wizardry was required to figure out just much of the product they should reasonably consume.

In 2015, the federal government proposed changes to the nutrition label, including listing total sugars and added sugars on nutrition tables, and making suggested serving sizes more consistent among similar foods. Among the sweeping recommendations in the Senate of Canada's March 2, 2016 report on Obesity in Canada was a call to move the nutrition label to front of food packages. There's no word yet on when any of these changes will be made.

In the meantime, how can you best decode nutrition labels, health claims and nutrient content claims and make wiser choices for a nutritious, well-balanced diet? Ciara Foy, a Toronto-based certified nutritionist and weight loss expert, has some advice.

### Always read the ingredient list

When she shops for food, Foy's not particularly interested in whether or not the product is labelled "reduced calories" or "fat-free." And those "contains antioxidants," "all natural," "boost your child's immunity" claims on the front of the packages? She doesn't give them a second glance. She's too busy scanning the package for one thing: the ingredient list.

Foy says much information gets missed when you just look at the Nutrition Facts table, packaging or promotional messages. "You really need to pay attention to the fine print – this includes the ingredients as well as the nutrition facts," says Foy. "When you read the ingredients, you should be asking yourself, 'Is this in a form that is as natural as possible?'"

The first important thing to note is that the ingredients are listed in descending order of weight, with the first two or three ingredients being the ones that matter most. The ingredient list is also vital if you have food allergies, so you can avoid problem foods.

Also note that when it comes to sodium, saturated and trans-fats, and added sugars – which in excess can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke and other complications – it can be difficult to tell just how much is in there. Why? These ingredients can go by several names.

One example is fat-free yogurt. You may be so focused on the fact that it's fat-free and packed with protein, probiotics and calcium that you miss that it's loaded with sugar. "Attractive packaging will say it's healthy with zero fat or low-to-no sugar," Foy says. "But watch out, because among the ingredients will be either artificial sweeteners (listed as sucralose, aspartame, Splenda, sugar alcohol or xylitol) or fancy words for sugar like high-fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, agave nectar or barley malt syrup."

### **Why fat-free doesn't mean no fat**

Some of the most eye-catching nutrition buzzwords must meet specific regulations mandated by Health Canada (see nutrient content claim table). You can trust that behind every mention of "low" or "free" there has been a process to evaluate whether or not a food meets those standards. But while such claims are a good place to start, they don't tell you the whole story.

Here are a few of the most common catchphrases manufacturers use on food – and how to look past the hype:

- **Fat-free.** This doesn't mean the food contains absolutely no fat. But for a product to claim to be "free" of something, it must contain an amount so small that it would be considered nutritionally insignificant. Word of caution: What some fat-free products lack in fat, they make up for in sugars, and sugar-free products can be loaded with fat.
- **Zero trans-fat.** The ideal intake of this artery-clogging fat is zero. But products that say no trans-fat can actually contain less than 0.5g per serving, meaning there is some in there. For example, popcorn can be an excellent source of fibre, is a whole grain, and can be low in calories. But if you eat several cups of microwave popcorn, the trans-fat can really add up. Be sure to check for ingredients such as hydrogenated oils or shortening, which mean trans-fat is still present.
- **Cholesterol-free.** Unfortunately, cholesterol-free doesn't mean literally no cholesterol. According to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), cholesterol-free products must contain less than 2 mg per serving, while low-cholesterol products must contain 20 mg or less per serving. Foods that say reduced or less cholesterol need to have at least 25% less than comparable products. The Heart and Stroke Foundation recommends healthy people consume less than 300 mg of cholesterol daily (200 mg for people with heart disease or diabetes).
- **Organic.** The CFIA says a product labelled "made with organic ingredients" must have at least 70% organic ingredients. Keep in mind that organic is not synonymous with healthy. Organic food can still be packed with fat, calories and sugar.
- **Multigrain.** Look for the words "whole grain" or "100% whole wheat" on packages of bread or crackers. Whole grains (including oats, brown rice, barley or popcorn) have

more fibre and other nutrients than refined grains, which have had their healthiest portions stripped away. Multigrain just means the ingredients include more than one kind of grain. Also, beware of darker breads: Some get their colour from molasses or caramel and are no healthier than refined white bread.

**Nutrient content claims and what they mean**

<b>Fat-free</b>	Less than 0.5 of fat per serving
<b>Low sodium</b>	Less than 140 mg of sodium per serving
<b>Reduced calories</b>	25% fewer calories per serving than the food it's being compared to
<b>No added sugar</b>	No added sugar – but natural sugars may be present
<b>Contains omega-3 fats</b>	At least 0.3g of omega-3 fats per serving
<b>Good source of calcium</b>	At least 15% of the recommended daily intake of calcium
<b>Good source of fibre</b>	At least 4g of fibre per serving
<b>Lean (meat or poultry)</b>	10% fat or less per portion

**The bottom line**

Eating healthy doesn't have to be hard. Whether you're counting calories for weight management, checking for trans-fat or tracking carbohydrates for diabetes control, understanding nutrition claims and labels can help you make smart choices.