

Deciphering nutrition facts

Knowing how to read the numbers will lead to healthier choices

With warming temperatures, your exercise and diet regimen may be kicking into high gear. Picking up the right food at the grocery store goes a long way toward a healthy diet.

Carly Zimmer, a registered dietician-nutritionist at OSF HealthCare, recommends flipping over the food package and looking at the nutrition facts. The black and white box of text has probably blended into the background, but knowing how to interpret the numbers is key to choosing the right morsel.

“Label reading can be very tedious when you first start, especially when it goes along with a new diagnosis,” Zimmer says. “But once you get in a rhythm and know what foods are suitable for your diet, it does get easier. It becomes habit.”

From top to bottom

Zimmer has a primer on the major points of the nutrition facts box:

- **Serving size:** This tricks people so often that even stand-up comedians joke about it.

The serving size almost always is not the whole package. A box of crackers may be five servings. Or when comparing foods, make sure the serving sizes are similar or do the math to make them so.

“Serving size doesn’t necessarily mean that’s the portion you need to stick to,” Zimmer says. “It can be a pretty good guide. But ultimately, pay attention to what the serving is because if you’re eating more or less than the designated serving, you need to adjust the rest of the nutrition facts.”

- **Calories:** Diet experts say 2,000 calories per day is the common measure. But, Zimmer says each person’s caloric intake is unique, and a dietitian can help with yours. So when you see calories listed on a food label, map the number to your needs.
- **Fat:** This category can get crowded with words like “Total fat,” “Unsaturated fat,” “Saturated fat” and “Trans fat.”

“Saturated fat is anything that comes from an animal product. High-fat dairy products, cheese, high-fat meat and butter,” Zimmer says. “Unsaturated fat are things like olive oil, nuts, nut butters and avocados.”

Choose foods with higher unsaturated fat over saturated fat, Zimmer says. Foods with saturated fat can increase bad cholesterol.

Trans fat is manufactured fat, specifically vegetable oil mixed with hydrogen. It increases a food’s shelf life but is a fat you want to avoid because it can also increase bad cholesterol. Pastries and biscuits are examples of foods high in trans fat.

But here's the tricky part: foods can be labeled "Trans fat free" – either on the front or in the nutrition facts – if there are .5 grams or less per serving. So you may eat several servings of a food labeled "Trans fat free" and think you are in the clear. But in reality, you just put several grams of trans fat in your body.

A work-around: look in the ingredients for "Partially hydrogenated oil." That's a sign the food contains trans fat.

- **Nutrients:** High-fiber foods are a good choice.

"Fiber helps keep you full. It helps regulate blood sugar. It's good for cholesterol levels," Zimmer says. "Most Americans don't get enough of it."

Women younger than 50 should get 25 grams of fiber per day. For women over 50, it's 21 grams. Men under 50 should aim for 38 grams per day. For men over 50, it's 30 grams.

You'll also see nutrients listed based on what the federal government says people aren't getting enough of. Right now, it's vitamin D, calcium, iron and potassium. So look for foods high in those nutrients. Food companies can list other vitamins and nutrients voluntarily.

- **Sugars:** Here, you'll see "Added sugar" and "Total sugar."

"Total sugar," as the name suggests, is all the sugar in a food. "Added sugar" is part of that total and counts sugar that is not naturally occurring.

The lower the numbers are, the better, Zimmer says. The American Heart Association recommends that women have less than 24 grams of added sugar per day. For men, it's less than 36 grams.

- **Percent daily value:** This is along the right side of the nutrition facts box. It lists the percentage of each nutrient based on a diet of 2,000 calories per day. Zimmer again reminds us that each person's dietary needs are unique. So use the right column as a guide, not a rule, Zimmer says.

Any nutrient that is 5% or less is considered low, while 20% or more is high.

"So if something is 20% or more fiber, that's a good source of fiber," Zimmer lists as an example.

Learn more

Learn more about nutrition facts on the [United States Food and Drug Administration website](#), and visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) for healthy recipes.