

A GUIDE TO FOOD LABELS

Beyond the Numbers

Many Canadians find the information on prepackaged foods confusing!

With many different numbers, symbols and nutrients, it can be hard to make decisions about which foods to choose. This guide aims to cut through the confusion and help you make sense of the food label, especially the nutrition facts table and ingredient list. You will learn how to use these two labelling tools to compare different products, choose foods that meet your nutrition needs and better manage special diets or allergies.

Remember that a healthy way of eating should aim for balance and variety.

The different nutrients and components in food all work together to support your overall health. When choosing foods, don't focus on only one or two nutrients. Instead, pay attention to all the nutrients together – including the nutrients that you want to get more of! A dietitian can help you figure out what's right for you.

Not every day or meal is the same – and that is normal. If you eat a variety of nutritious foods and have a balanced diet, you have a greater chance of meeting your nutrient needs.

When you understand how to read the nutrition facts table and ingredient list as information partners, you'll have the tools to make decisions to help you enjoy your food and know that you are making nutritious choices.



What about vitamins and minerals that are added to food?

The nutrition facts table shows both the nutrients that are naturally occurring in the food AND the nutrients that have been added. The ingredient list only shows the nutrients that have been added. If a nutrient is naturally occurring, it will not appear in the ingredient list.

Example:

In this example, calcium and potassium are naturally occurring, and vitamin D and vitamin A have been added. That's why you can see vitamins A and D listed as ingredients, while calcium and potassium are not.

Naturally occurring and added ingredients are included in nutrition facts tables.

There are regulations and rules for which nutrients are allowed to be added to foods and what food can be fortified.

Mandatory fortification

Mandatory fortification is when nutrients **MUST** be added to a food by law to make sure that Canadians can get enough of these nutrients in their diets. For example, milk must be fortified with vitamin D.

Voluntary fortification

Voluntary fortification is when nutrients **MAY** be added to a food. For example, yogurt may be fortified with vitamin D and breakfast cereal may be fortified with zinc.

Why are calcium, potassium and iron listed as core nutrients in the nutrition facts table?

Calcium, iron and potassium have important functions in the body. Many Canadians are not getting enough of these nutrients in their diets, making them a public health concern. Including calcium, iron and potassium in the nutrition facts table helps Canadians find the foods that can help them meet their nutrition needs.

Why is vitamin D added to milk?

Vitamin D is an important nutrient for healthy bones and teeth. We often do not get enough vitamin D because our skin cannot produce enough from sun exposure, especially during the winter. In Canada, the law requires that vitamin D be added to a few commonly eaten foods, like milk, to help prevent a deficiency.



What you need to know about the ingredient list

- The ingredients in a food are listed in order by weight, starting with the ingredient that weighs the most and ending with the ingredient that weighs the least.
- The ingredient list includes all the ingredients that have been used to make that food, including nutrients that have been added.
- Some ingredients may appear at the end of the list of ingredients in any order, including:
 - flavours
 - food additives
 - seasonings (except for salt)
 - added vitamins and minerals
 - flavour enhancers, like monosodium glutamate (MSG)

Understanding the ingredients

What you need to know

Foods are made up of more than just the core nutrients listed on the label!

Most packaged foods must have a nutrition facts table, which shows serving size, calories in that serving size, the amount of 12 core nutrients expressed in units like grams (g) and milligrams (mg) and percent daily values.

However, some nutrition facts tables may show more nutrients and some may show less. Food manufacturers may choose to add other optional nutrients in addition to the 12 core nutrients if they want to highlight specific nutrients or if the size and available space on the packaging permit. For example, a cereal box has the space to list more nutrients in the nutrition facts table than a yogurt container. A nutrition facts table with more nutrients does not mean that the food is more nutritious than a food with a label that only lists the core nutrients.

What does % daily value (% DV) mean?

This number represents how much of a nutrient one serving of prepackaged food contributes to the total daily needs for that nutrient.

Example:

Let's look at how much calcium is in 1 cup (250 mL) of milk. In this example, 23% DV of calcium means that 1 cup (250 mL) of milk provides 23% of the recommended daily calcium needs or about a quarter of the daily needs.



Calories in that serving size



Serving size

Here is an example of the information in a nutrition facts table for 2% milk:

Nutrition Facts

Per 1 cup (250 ml) serving

	% Daily Value*
Calories 130	
Fat 5 g	7 %
Saturated 3.5 g	19 %
+ Trans 0.2 g	
Carbohydrate 12 g	
Fibre 0 g	0 %
Sugars 12 g	12 %
Protein 9 g	
Cholesterol 20 mg	
Sodium 90 mg	4 %
Potassium 400 mg	9 %
Calcium 300 mg	23 %
Iron 0.1 mg	1 %
Vitamin A 150 µg	17 %
Vitamin D 5.0 µg	25 %
Thiamine 0.1 mg	8 %
Riboflavin 0.45 mg	35 %
Niacin 2.25 mg	14 %
Vitamin B ₁₂ 1 µg	42 %
Pantothenate 1.6 mg	32 %
Phosphorous 225 mg	18 %
Iodide 70 µg	47 %
Magnesium 25 mg	6 %
Zinc 1.0 mg	9 %

*5% or less is **a little**, 15% or more is **a lot**

Ingredients: Partly Skimmed Milk • Vitamin A Palmitate • Vitamin D₃



12 core nutrients



Percent daily values (% DVs)

Other nutrients (optional)

Milk is the ingredient with the most weight.

Added vitamins are listed as ingredients.



Let's take a closer look

Confused about sugar?

What you need to know about sugar

The amount of sugar listed in the nutrition facts table is the **amount of total sugar**: this includes both the sugar naturally occurring in the food and added sugar.

Lots of nutritious foods like fruits, vegetables, and dairy products have naturally occurring sugar, along with many other important nutrients.

You can use the ingredient list to help you figure out if sugar has been added by the manufacturer. You will know it has been added if you see words like 'sugar', 'molasses', 'honey', 'corn syrup', 'juice concentrate', 'dextrose', 'glucose', 'maltose', and 'sucrose' listed as ingredients.

Example:

In this ingredient list of unsweetened, store-bought applesauce sugar is not listed, meaning that this product does not have added sugar. A serving of this food has 13 g of naturally occurring sugar from the apples.

A serving of this food has **13 g** naturally occurring sugar from the apples.

Nutrition Facts

Per 1/2 cup (125 ml)

	% Daily Value*
Calories 60	
Fat 0 g	0 %
Saturated 0 g	0 %
+ Trans 0 g	
Carbohydrate 16 g	
Fibre 2 g	7 %
Sugars 13 g	13 %
Protein 0.3 g	
Cholesterol 0 mg	
Sodium 0 mg	0 %
Potassium 125 mg	3 %
Calcium 10 mg	1 %
Iron 0.1 mg	1 %
Vitamin C 26 mg	29 %

*5% or less is a little, 15% or more is a lot

Ingredients: Apples • Water • Ascorbic Acid



Pay attention to the serving size!



All the information in the nutrition facts table, such as calories and **nutrient amounts**, is based on the **serving size** listed at the top of the table.



When comparing similar products, **make sure you are looking at the serving size** so you can make an accurate comparison.



Compare the serving size to the amount you eat. For example, if you eat one slice of bread but the serving size listed is two slices, you'll need to cut in half all the amounts listed.



A serving size might be based on a measurement, the number of pieces, a typical amount eaten in one sitting, or even the whole container. **It's not meant to be the recommended amount.** You can eat more or less!

Your dietitian:

Contact:

What will I focus on when reading food labels?

For more tips, recipes, ideas, and strategies to support your personal food and health journey visit **WhatYouEat.ca**.

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QUIZ

1. How many “core nutrients” may be listed on a food label in Canada?
 - Up to 12
They are: Total Fat, Saturated Fat, Trans Fat, Carbohydrates, Fibre, Sugar, Protein, Cholesterol, Sodium, Potassium, Calcium, and Iron.
2. Why is cholesterol listed as a core nutrient?
 - Our bodies produce natural cholesterol. The quantity listed on the label helps guide Canadians in the selection of products that are lower in cholesterol.
3. What is the first thing listed on the Nutrition Facts label?
 - Serving Size (Example 1 cup (250 ml.) is one serving of milk)
4. Why is Vitamin D added to milk?
 - Canadians often don’t get enough Vitamin D because our skin can’t produce enough from sun exposure, especially during the winter. The law requires Vitamin D to be added to a few commonly eaten foods, like milk, to help prevent a deficiency.
5. Some labels only list the product’s core nutrients. Is this legal?
 - Yes. Depending on the size of the box, container, etc., there may only be room for the core nutrients to be listed.
6. Can there be sugar in foods if it’s not listed on the label?
 - Yes. Example: apple sauce with no sugar added still has the naturally occurring sugars from the apples.
7. On the label, what does the percentage of daily value mean?
 - It provides the percentage of the daily amount of that product to be consumed. Example: Calcium 300 mg. is 23% of the recommended daily intake of calcium.
8. What is the “ingredients” list and where is it found on the label?
 - It is the last entry on the label, and provides all ingredients, including added ingredients, in that product. (Example: spices, colorings, vitamins, etc.)
9. Why is the “serving size” listing important?
 - In addition to providing the suggested serving size for one person, if less or more is consumed it will affect the daily percentage listing for that product. Example: If a serving size is 125 ml. containing 16 grams of carbohydrates, and you consume 200 ml. then your carbohydrate amount for that day will increase.
10. A couple of final facts: Health Canada develops the regulations for Nutrition Labels. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) enforces the regulations.