

Decoding Food Labels

General Rules

- Focus on enjoying foods without labels! Think apples, sweet potatoes, pumpkin seeds, lentils, spinach, mushrooms. Aim for the bulk of your diet to be fresh plant-based foods.
- For other lightly processed foods like meat, seafood, yogurt, canned beans, soups, broths, crackers, wraps, almond milk, frozen fruits and vegetables, read your labels carefully.
- Make note of your go-to brands for easier future shopping.

The ingredient label

- The most important part, the list of ingredients of what is actually *in* your food, which is more important than the nutrition facts label.
- The fewer ingredients the better. Keep it simple!
- You and your grandma should be able to recognize all of the ingredients as food.
- Know that ingredients are listed by highest volume, so if sugar is listed first, then you know that product has more sugar than any other ingredient by weight.
- Watch for added sugar on the ingredient label that comes in many forms and words other than “sugar”. High fructose corn syrup and ingredients that end in -ose.
- “Natural flavors” - at one point derived from something in nature but may have been engineered and altered to something quite unnatural by the time it’s in your food. It’s a mystery ingredient at best.
- Avoid the top 10 worst ingredients listed on the right.

10 of the worst ingredients:

1. Trans fats: hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils
2. Corn, soy, canola, cottonseed, vegetable, palm kernel oils
3. Monosodium glutamate, or MSG
4. Artificial sweeteners: sucralose, aspartame, acesulfame-K, saccharine
5. Artificial colors and food dyes like FD&C or yellow #5
6. Artificial flavoring
7. Nitrate/nitrite
8. TBHQ, BHA
9. Sodium benzoate
10. High fructose corn syrup

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The nutrition facts label

- The FDA does not require foods to be tested for nutritional content described on the facts panel. It's not a reliable source of nutrition information.
- Trans fats: food manufacturers are allowed to list 0g trans fats as long as it's under .5g/serving. Always look at the ingredient label for trans fats like hydrogenated oils.
- Sodium: the USDA has set 2300mg as the upper safe limit. If you regularly consume processed or packaged foods be mindful to not exceed it.
- Sugar: includes both naturally occurring sugars (like in almonds or fruit) and added sugars (like cane sugar). Read your ingredient label to avoid the added sugars.
- Calories: are numbers that tell us little to nothing about the quality of the food. Put more focus on the ingredient list and what's actually *in* your food.
- Serving size: if you do peek at the calories, do also take note of the serving size.

The marketing on the label

- "All Natural" – means nothing. These are unregulated marketing phrases.
- The more health claims on the label, the higher likelihood that it's *not* a healthy food product. These claims are rarely validated by the FDA.
- Organic: The organic seal is intended that growers and manufacturers have to meet the strictest standards and include being free of antibiotics and growth hormones, genetic modifications (GMO), pesticides, preservatives, chemicals, heavy metals, and irradiation.
- When buying meat, poultry, fish, or any animal by-products, make sure there is a city and state of origin on the label or do not buy it. Much of these foods are cheaply shipped in from other countries. Know *where* your food comes from.
- Grass-fed or pastured: look for this on the label when buying meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products. This is more important than organic.
- Non-GMO indicates that the item or ingredient doesn't contain genetically modified or engineered organisms.
- "Sugar free" usually indicates the product has artificial sweetener.
- "No added sugars" usually indicates the product is truly free of any added sugar, which can be confirmed by reading the ingredient label.

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Examples & Practice

Compare these two pasta sauce nutrition facts and ingredient labels.

LEFT: contains real food ingredients we can recognize. RIGHT: contains cheap, GMO oil, salt, and sugar at the top of the list, plus unknown ingredients in 'natural flavors'.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1/2 cup (125g)	
Servings Per Container about 6	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories	80
Calories from Fat	40
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 4.5g	7%
Saturated Fat 0.5g	3%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 310mg	13%
Total Carbohydrate 8g	3%
Dietary Fiber 2g	8%
Sugars 4g	
Protein 2g	
Vitamin A 15% • Vitamin C 2%	
Calcium 0% • Iron 2%	
* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.	

Ingredients: Organic Tomato Puree (water, organic tomato paste), Organic Tomatoes in Juice, Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Organic Sauteed Onion, Organic Carrot Puree, Organic Basil, Sea Salt, Organic Sauteed Garlic, Citric Acid, Calcium Chloride, Organic Fennel, Organic Black Pepper, Organic Oregano.

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Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1/2 cup (125g)	
Servings about 5	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 80	Calories from Fat 20
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 2g	3%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 480mg	20%
Potassium 360mg	10%
Total Carbohydrate 12g	4%
Dietary Fiber 2g	8%
Sugars 7g	
Protein 2g	
Vitamin A 10% • Vitamin C 20%	
Calcium 2% • Iron 4%	
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.	

INGREDIENTS: TOMATO PUREE (WATER, TOMATO PASTE), SOYBEAN OIL, SALT, SUGAR, DEHYDRATED ONIONS, EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL, SPICES (GARLIC, CHEESE (PART-SKIM MILK, CHEESE CULTURED, SALT, ENZYMES)), NATURAL FLAVOR.

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Best if used by date on cap.

DIRECTIONS: Heat sauce on stovetop or in microwave, bring occasionally. Refrigerate immediately after opening.

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Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 tbsp (15 mL)	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 35	Calories From Fat 15
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 1.5 g	2%
Saturated Fat 0 g	0%
Trans Fat 0 g	
Polyunsaturated Fat 0 g	
Monounsaturated Fat 0 g	
Cholesterol 0 mg	0%
Sodium 0 mg	0%
Total Carbohydrate 5 g	2%
Sugars 5 g	
Protein 0 g	
Not a significant source of dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron.	
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.	

Do you know what this food product is by reading the ingredient label?

(Answer: This sugary, oil water with a lot of preservatives and artificial flavoring is a popular hazelnut Coffee Mate non-dairy coffee creamer.)

INGREDIENTS: WATER, SUGAR, PARTIALLY HYDROGENATED SOYBEAN AND/OR COTTONSEED OIL, AND LESS THAN 2% OF SODIUM CASEINATE (A MILK DERIVATIVE)**, MONO- AND DIGLYCERIDES, DIPO-TASSIUM PHOSPHATE, COLOR ADDED, CELLULOSE GEL, NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL FLAVORS, CELLULOSE GUM, CARRAGEENAN, DEXTROSE.

** Not a source of lactose.

Current as of March, 2010. Please see shelf packaging for any changes.

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Avoid sugar that has been added and is shown on the ingredient label. While this almond butter contains 1g of sugar per serving according to the nutrition facts label, it doesn't contain any *added sugars*, as seen on the ingredient label.

Ingredients:

Organic Raw Sprouted Almonds

Nutrition Facts:

Serving Size 1 oz. Calories 187. % Daily Value* total fat 16g 26%, saturated fat 1.5g 3%, trans fat 0%, cholesterol 0%, sodium 0mg 0%, total carbohydrate 6g 2%, dietary fiber 1g 4%, **sugars 1g**, protein 5g, vitamin A 0%, vitamin C 0%, calcium 8%, iron 6%. *(Percent daily value based on a 2000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower based on your calorie needs.)

Check the serving size. If you do an occasional splurge on a processed food, be sure to look at more than just the calories. Review the serving size so you are aware of how much you are consuming. Downing this whole pint of ice cream = 1040 calories, half the average person's daily intake.



All calories are not created equal. These snacks are equal in calories (100), but the snacks on the RIGHT are far more superior in nutrition compared to the the processed food snacks on the left.

