



What's on a Label?



Session Overview

In this session, participants will learn how to read food labels and use this information to select healthier foods. An educator will provide an overview of the information and nutrient listings found on food labels. Class participants will practice label reading by looking at food packages. The group will discuss what information is most useful to them and how they will use label reading to make healthier food choices.

Target Audience: English and Spanish speaking adults

Group Size: 5-30 participants

Time Needed: 30 – 45 minutes

Behavioral Objectives:

After the session participants will be able to:

1. Name three items listed on the Nutrition Facts label.
2. State at least 2 reasons why it is important to read the food label when shopping for food.
3. Use the food label to choose a cereal that is high in fiber and a snack food low in sodium.

Key Message:

Individuals can use the food label to make healthier food choices and to compare the nutritional content of similar foods.

Materials Needed for Session:

- Primary handouts: Team Nutrition *Read It Before You Eat It* mini poster; USDA 10 Tips 3 tip sheets: *Salt & Sodium*, *Make Half Your Grains Whole*, *Cut Back on Your Kid's Sweet Treats*; sample cereal label
- Sample nutrition labels including cereal boxes, bread packages, dairy product labels, snack food packages, ramen noodle package, canned food, 100% juice and fruit-flavored drink nutrition labels, etc.
- Cereal, bowls, measuring cups
- Optional: Team Nutrition *Read It Before You Eat It* poster; *Network Flavors of My Kitchen* cookbook

Outline of 45-minute session (30-minute session in italics):

- Welcome and introduction to “What’s on a Label?” (3 min) (*2 min*)
- Activity 1: Serving Size and Servings per Container (6 min) (*4 min*)
- Activity 2: Nutrition Numbers (12 min) (*9 min*)
- Activity 3: Ingredient List & Front of Package Information (5 min) (*3 min*)
- Activity 4: Practice Reading Food Labels (10 min) (*7 min*)
- Activity 5: Using the Food Label to Find Healthier Foods (4 min) (*2 min*)
- Conclusion and Evaluation (5 min) (*3 min*)

Welcome to “What’s on a Label?” (3 min)

1. Welcome and introduce the class topic (*If teaching this class as a series, review the past class and home activities – Refer to “Review” sheet.*)

2. Review the class objectives and the key message. Ask the following questions:

- How many of you read food labels when you shop for food?
- Who can tell me what is on a food label? *Calories, fat, fiber, etc.*
- Why is it important to read food labels? *Make healthy food choices, compare similar foods, find out what is in different foods, etc.*

Today we will start a two-part class to help you make healthier food and beverage choices. In part one, we will discuss how to read food labels and in part two, we will discuss beverages. (*Distribute the handouts.*)

Activity 1: Serving Size and Servings Per Container (6 min)

We will start at the top of the Nutrition Facts label and then go through each section. Who can tell me the first thing listed on a food label? Look in the **orange** section of the **Read It poster** and **handout**. Serving size and number of servings per container are listed first.

- What is the serving size for this food? *1 cup*
- How many servings are in the package? *2*

This information is on all Nutrition Facts labels. Let’s take a closer look at serving size.

Activity: I need one volunteer.

- Please pour the amount of cereal you would normally eat into this bowl.
- Read the serving size listed on the cereal box and pour that amount into this bowl.
- Compare the amount of cereal you typically eat to the serving size listed on the label.
- Estimate the number of calories in the amount of cereal you poured to the calories in one serving.

Activity 2: Nutrition Numbers (12 min)

Now we will review calories, nutrients and other sections of the Nutrition Facts label.

1. **Calories:** Look below the orange section at the **white** section.

The calories and nutrient content listed on the label is for one serving. If you eat two servings, you need to double the calories and nutrient values listed.

- If you eat 1 serving of this food (1 cup), how many calories have you eaten? *250*
- If you eat the whole package (2 cups), how many calories have you eaten? *500*

Sometimes we may eat a whole package of food not knowing how many servings it contains. So, next time think twice before you eat the whole package.

2. **Nutrients:** Now we will look at the blue and purple sections of the Nutrition Facts label.

a. **Nutrients to GET LESS of:** We want to get less of the items listed in the **blue** section. 5% or less is low and 20% or more is high. The percentage to the right of these nutrients should be 5% or less. This means the food is low in those nutrients. If you see 20% or more, the food is high in those nutrients.

- What nutrients do you see listed? *Total fat, saturated fat, trans fat & cholesterol*
- Do you see any nutrients with 5% or less? *No*
- Do you see any nutrients with 20% or more? *Total fat is close; it has 18%. This means this food provides you with 18% of the total fat you need for the whole day.*

- b. **Sodium:** If you look just below the blue section you will see sodium or salt in the **white** section. We also want to limit the amount of sodium we eat because sodium plays a role in high blood pressure. If you look you at the top of the *Salt and Sodium* handout you will see we should reduce our sodium intake to less than 2,300 mg per day which is about 1 teaspoon.
- What percent do you see to the right of sodium? *20%*
 - Is this high or low? *High - So we know this food is high in sodium.*
 - How many milligrams of sodium does one serving of the food on the poster provide? *470 mg*
 - How many milligrams of sodium do two servings of this food provide? *940 mg – almost half of the sodium we need for the whole day!*
 - The handout provides tips to reduce our sodium intake. Can someone please read tips 2, 3, and 7?
- c. **Nutrients to GET ENOUGH of:** We want to get enough of the items in the **purple** section. These are nutrients we need so we want the percent to be 20% or more.
- What nutrients do you see in the purple section? *Dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron*
 - Do you see any nutrients with 20% or more? *Yes – calcium*
 - Do you see any nutrients with 5% or less? *Yes – fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C and iron. So this food is a good source of calcium but not vitamin A & C, iron and fiber.*
- Let's take a closer look at fiber. Look at the top of the *Make Half Your Grains Whole* handout. This lists examples of whole grains.
- How many grams of fiber are in 1 serving? *0 g; 0%*
 - Do you think this is a whole grain? *No, a whole grain would have fiber.*
 - The handout provides tips to increase fiber. Can someone please read these tips 1, 10 and 8?
- d. **Sugars:** If you look just below fiber you will see sugars. This includes both natural and added sugars.
- Natural sugar is found in fruits, dairy and grains. Added sugar is found in foods like cookies cakes, ice cream, sweetened drinks and other foods.
 - Added sugar is listed in the ingredient list; it is not separated from “natural” sugar on the Nutrition Facts label.
 - Does this food have added sugar? We do not know because the ingredient list is not on this poster or handout. We would have to read the ingredient list to check if this food has added sugar.
 - The *Sweet Treats* handout provides tips on how to limit added sugars. Can someone please read tips 1, 2 and 8?

Activity: Now that you have looked at the Nutrition Facts label on the *Read It* poster, can you guess what food it is? Remember it is high in total fat and sodium but it is also high in calcium. *Macaroni and Cheese*

Activity 3: Ingredient List and Front of Package Information (5 min)

Now let's look at the front of the food package and the ingredient list.

1. **Front of package:** If you look at the front of a food package you may see different terms and claims. For example, if you look at the front of this cereal box you will see it claims to be "whole grain".
 - Do you think this cereal is a good source of whole grains? *Maybe; it may contain a little or a lot but we need to look at the fiber percent and ingredient list to make sure.*
 - What are some other terms and claims you may have seen on food packages?
 - Nutrient content claims: "low sodium", "low fat", "100% juice"
 - Health claims: "Heart healthy", "Helps lower cholesterol", "Boosts immunity"
2. **Ingredient list:** The ingredient list may be harder to find. It is usually on the side or back of a food package and is usually in small print.
 - a. Ingredients are listed in order from most to least. When an ingredient is close to the top of the list, the food is high in that ingredient.
 - b. You may have heard of some ingredients and there are some you may have never heard of and can't pronounce. Processed foods may have ingredients you have not heard of like preservatives, added colorings, added flavorings and more.
 - c. Let's look at the ingredient list of this sample cereal label.
 - Do you see any ingredients you have never heard of or can't pronounce? *Partially hydrogenated palm kernel oil, polyglycerol esters, guar gum*
 - Is this a whole grain? *Yes, the first ingredient is a whole grain – corn.*
 - Does it have added sugar? *Yes – sugar, high fructose corn syrup and brown sugar are listed in the ingredient list.*

Activity 4: Practice Reading Food Labels (10 min)

Now we are going to practice reading food labels. Some of you brought food packages from home. I also have a box of food packages you can choose from. I want to make sure everyone has one or two food packages. Please stand up (or raise your hand) if the following describes your food:

- Serving Size = 1 cup
- Serving Size = less than 1 cup
- Servings Per Container = 2 or more
- Calories = 300 or less
- Total Fat = 5% or less
- Sodium = 20% or more
- Dietary Fiber = 20% or more
- Vitamin A = 5% or less
- Vitamin C = 20% or more
- Calcium = 20% or more
- Iron = 5% or less
- A whole grain
- Has added sugar
- Has an ingredient I can't pronounce
- Has 5 or less ingredients
- Has a health claim

As you can see, we have a wide variety of foods with different nutrients and different ingredients. We can use this information to compare foods or brands to make healthier food choices. For example, some snack foods, such as chips, have more fat but less sodium than other snack foods, such as pretzels and crackers. So, it is up to you if you want to choose the snack with less fat or the snack with less sodium.

Activity 5: Using the food label to find healthier foods (4 min)

In small groups or in pairs, discuss the following questions:

1. What items on the food label are most helpful to you?
2. What food label are you going to read before you buy the item next time?

Conclusion and Evaluation (5 min)

Now we can see why it is important to read food labels.

Home Activities:

1. Read at least two cereal box labels and the label on two of your favorite snack foods during your next trip to the grocery store.
2. Go to the FDA website or search on the internet for “eat for a healthy heart FDA consumer update video” to get links for videos and handouts that have additional information about food labels.

Evaluation:

- Do you have any questions?
- Let’s review. (*Distribute evaluation forms or conduct verbally.*)

What’s on a Label?

After attending this class I feel confident that I can:

	Agree Very Much	Agree	I Am Not Sure	Disagree	Disagree Very Much
1. Name 3 items listed on the Nutrition Facts label.					
2. State at least 2 reasons why it is important to read the food label when shopping for food.					
3. Use the food label to choose a cereal that is high in fiber and a snack food low in sodium.					

Closing:

Thanks for attending the class and I hope you are now able to use the information on a food label to make healthier choices.

If part of a series of classes:

Now we will take a closer look at some of your favorite beverages by reading the labels and comparing portion sizes.

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