

Reading Nutrition Labels

Supports: Building Block 4 — Labels, Health Claims & Grocery Shopping

Why It Matters

Food packaging is designed to sell, but the label on the back is where you get the real information. Learning to read it puts you in charge, so you can choose foods that match what you actually want more or less of. The best part is that many whole foods, like fresh produce, barely need a label at all. For everything that comes in a package, a quick glance at a few key spots tells you most of what you need to know.

What to Know

Start with the serving size

Everything on the Nutrition Facts label, from calories to grams of sugar, is based on one serving. That is your reference point. It is worth checking, because a package can hold more than one serving, and the numbers you see may be for a smaller amount than you would actually eat. Serving size is a general measurement, not a rule about how much you should have.

Scan the numbers that matter to you

- Calories: a quick sense of the energy in one serving.
- % Daily Value: shows whether a serving is low or high in a nutrient, based on a general 2,000-calorie day; about 5% is low and about 20% is high.
- Fiber and protein: nutrients many people like to get more of for lasting fullness.
- Added sugars: listed on their own line so you can see sugar added during processing, separate from sugar that occurs naturally.

Read the ingredient list

Ingredients are listed in order of amount, so the first few make up most of the food. For more nutrient-dense picks, look for recognizable whole foods near the top. For less-processed picks, look for a short list of items you can actually pronounce.

Compare, do not memorize. You do not need to track every gram. Use the label to compare two similar products on the shelf and pick the one that fits what you are going for that day. That single habit does a lot.

Try This

Next time you shop, pull one packaged food you buy often and give its label a slow read. Notice the serving size first, then let your eyes travel to the numbers and ingredients that matter to you.

- ? What surprised you when you checked the serving size against how much you usually eat?
- ? Which one or two nutrients do you most want to keep an eye on, and why?
- ? After reading the ingredient list, would you keep this pick or try a comparison next time?