

# NUTRITION LABELS Demystified

In a world where ads lure you to eat all the wrong things, the Nutrition Facts panel can help you make smart choices—if you know how to use it. > BY LISA JAMES

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 2 tortillas (51g)	
Servings Per Container 6	
Amount Per Serving	
<b>Calories 110</b>	<b>Calories from Fat 10</b>
% Daily Value*	
<b>Total Fat 1g</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Saturated Fat 0g</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Trans Fat 0g</b>	
<b>Cholesterol 0mg</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Sodium 30mg</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Total Carbohydrate 22g</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Dietary Fiber 2g</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Sugars 0g</b>	
<b>Protein 2g</b>	
Vitamin A 0%	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 2%	Iron 4%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a diet of 2,000 calories. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:	
Calories 2,000 2,500	
Total Fat	Less than 65g 80g
Saturated Fat	Less than 20g 25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g
Calories per gram:	
Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4	

**If smart eating means getting the biggest** nutritional bang for your buck, the Nutrition Facts panel is Dietary Intelligence 101. “By focusing on key nutrients—those to encourage, such as fiber, vitamins and minerals, as well as those to limit, such as sodium and saturated fat—the label is supposed to help consumers make healthier food choices,” says Lilian Cheung, DSc, RD, editorial director of The Nutrition Source ([www.thenutritionsource.org](http://www.thenutritionsource.org)), a website maintained by the Harvard School of Public Health. Cheung says that people with chronic diseases are most likely to check the panels (if not to always act on them), but this data is useful to anyone who wants to improve their dietary IQ.





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**1** This one can be tricky, as a single package may contain a number of servings. Bottled drinks are a particular culprit. The standard serving is 8 ounces, but “beverages are often sold in bottles of 20 ounces or more,” says Cheung. “I’d like to see beverage makers list the total number of calories per container on the front of the bottle.”

**2** Speaking of calories, this tells you the total amount of energy supplied from all sources including carbs, fats and proteins. Obviously, if you want to lose weight you’ll be keeping a sharp eye on this figure (and remembering to multiply it by the total number of servings). But the idea is to also avoid “empty” calories—foods that provide a blast of fat, sugar and/or salt without any vitamins or other important micronutrients.

**3** The % Daily Value shows how much of each nutrient a single serving provides compared to your needs for the entire day (to learn more about DV see “Overcoming Nutritional Deficiencies” on page 38). If you are trying to limit a specific nutrient this figure will tell you how much of a hit your daily “budget” for that nutrient will take. For example, if you’re trying to limit fat intake, a food that provides 15% Daily Value of fat will be a better bet than one providing 28%.

**4** Scientists have long known about the link between saturated fat and heart disease. But *trans* fat, a low-cost synthetic creation, is also hazardous. Cheung says it takes time to make the scientific case to the FDA for a Nutrition Facts change. In the case of *trans* fat, evidence of its cholesterol-raising properties first came to light in 1990 and it was added to the panel in 2006. A product can contain up to half a gram of *trans* fat and still be called *trans*-free; double-check by looking for hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated (*trans*) fats on the ingredient listing. Anything with 3 grams of fat or less per serving is considered to be low in fat; for a product to be considered “low cholesterol” it has to contain 20 mg or less plus 2 grams or less of saturated fat.

**5** Don’t let concerns about fat distract you from the need to limit your intake of sodium (salt), an excess of which is linked to higher blood pressure. Sodium-free products contain less than 5 mg a serving; very low sodium, 5 to 35 mg; low sodium, 36 to 140 mg.

**6** Like the information on fats, the panel section on carbs has two sublistings. In this case, one of them, fiber, is a positive. Most Americans don’t get the 25 to 38 grams of daily fiber needed for optimal health. Foods with 5 or more grams per serving are considered high in fiber; look for products that contain at least 3 grams. On the other hand, sugar is definitely something you want to consume less of. As with *trans* fats, this panel section is best used together with the ingredients list; look for multiple sugar sources, including honey, molasses and anything that ends in “ose” (the scientific way of saying “sugar”). A product is considered sugar-free if it contains less than half a gram per serving (4 to 5 grams equals a level teaspoon of table sugar).

**7** This section tells you how much calcium, iron and vitamins A and C the food contains as a percentage of the DV. The more, the better; 20% or greater means the food is rated “high,” “rich in” or an “excellent source” of a specific nutrient.

**8** This footnote provides a context for the “% Daily Value” figures next to each of the nutrient categories. It sets “less than” goals for total and saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium, and “at least” goals for total carbohydrate and dietary fiber. But you must always evaluate this information in the light of your own dietary choices, such as eating a diet that calls for less than 2,000 calories a day or a low-carb diet, which negates the total carbohydrate recommendation.

**9** Although it’s not shown here, we’ve already seen that the Nutrition Facts panel should be used in conjunction with the ingredients list, which is also required by law for all packaged foods. Ingredients are listed in descending prominence by weight (water added in making a food is considered to be an ingredient, and must be listed as such). On a list of “corn, wheat, olive oil, salt,” for instance, corn would be the most prominent ingredient, salt the least. Choose foods that list whole ingredients whenever possible, such as “whole wheat flour” versus “unbleached wheat flour.” In addition, Cheung would like the FDA to “carefully consider front-of-package rating and labeling systems. Done well, these could help consumers cut through some of the confusion that’s out there.” ♦