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HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT FOOD LABELS?



Grocery shopping seems like an easy task, but when it comes to finding healthy choices in the jam-packed aisles, it's not as simple as you may think. With so many options available, it can be hard to decide what to put in your shopping cart—do you go with the 12-grain bread or the whole wheat flax bread? How do you choose what to buy? You need to read the food labels. In a survey of American consumers by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), more than half of respondents said that when purchasing a product for the first time, they often read the nutrition information on the label. Do you fall into that group? How much do you know about what's on food labels and what all that information means? Take this quiz to find out.

1. The serving size listed on the Nutrition Facts panel represents which of the following?
 - A. How much you eat at one time
 - B. How much is in the package
 - C. A standardized amount to allow for comparison to other foods
 - D. B and C

2. In what order are ingredients listed on food labels?

- A. Alphabetically
- B. By weight, heaviest ingredients first
- C. By weight, lightest ingredients first
- D. By food group

3. How much sodium can one serving of a food contain for it to be considered low in sodium?

- A. Up to 20% of the Daily Value (DV) for sodium
- B. Up to 15% of the DV for sodium
- C. Up to 10% of the DV for sodium
- D. Up to 5% of the DV for sodium

4. When sugar is listed on the Nutrition Facts panel, where does it come from?

- A. It was added to the food.
- B. It's hidden sugar from no- and low-calorie sweeteners.
- C. It naturally occurs in the food.
- D. A and C.

5. When looking at fat content on a Nutrition Facts panel, which of the following is most important to check?

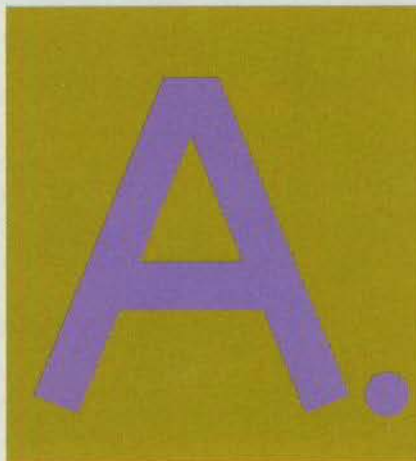
- A. Saturated fats
- B. *Trans* fats
- C. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats
- D. A and B

6. If a Nutrition Facts panel lists 0 grams of *trans* fat, this means there is no *trans* fat in the food.

TRUE FALSE

(Answers begin on page 44.)

HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT FOOD LABELS?



1. C. The serving size listed on a food label's Nutrition Facts panel is a standardized amount designed to make it easy to compare nutrition information about different foods. It is usually based on the serving sizes listed in the US Department of Agriculture Dietary Guidelines, and often, it reflects the amount of food that is recommended to be eaten at one time. This amount is not the same as portion size, which is the amount of food you *actually* eat at one time. For example, the serving size of many breakfast cereals is 1 cup. You may choose to eat $\frac{3}{4}$ cup, 1 cup, or $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups, and that would be your portion size.

The nutrition facts on the food label—the amount of calories, grams of fat and sugar, and so on—are based on one serving, not one portion. If your portion size is larger than the serving size, you will take in more calories and other nutrients than are listed on the label. For example, if 1 cup of cereal contains 150 calories, but you eat $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups, you will be getting 225 calories.

It's also important to look at the number of servings per container because many packages of food

contain more than one serving. This can be especially tricky when it comes to beverages or snacks that appear to be individually sized. You may drink a 20-ounce beverage in one sitting, but that is almost certainly more than one serving. The serving size for beverages is usually 8 ounces, so if you drink an entire 20-ounce bottle, you need to multiply all of the information on the Nutrition Facts panel by 2.5—the number of servings you're consuming.

2. B. The ingredients are listed in order of weight, from the heaviest to the lightest. That means the most predominant ingredients are first, followed by the ingredients that are present in lesser amounts.

The ingredient list is a great tool for determining how healthful a food is. For example, bread made from whole grains, such as whole wheat bread, is better for you than bread made from refined grains, such as white bread. (In the refining process, most of the fiber and many of the nutrients are stripped from the grain.) So how do you tell if a loaf of bread is made mostly from whole grains instead of refined grains? If the first ingredient is enriched wheat flour, which is not a whole grain, then you know the bread is made mostly of refined grains. If the first ingredient has the word "whole" in it, such as "whole wheat flour," then you know the bread is made mostly of whole grains and is a better choice.

The ingredient list will also give you an idea of how close a food is to its natural state. Processed foods may have fillers and other additives. In general, you want to look for foods that have shorter

ingredient lists, and to make sure you can pronounce all the ingredients.

3. D. The Percent Daily Value (DV) on the Nutrition Facts panel tells you how much a serving of food contributes to the recommended amount of each nutrient for the day. The Percent DV is based on a 2,000-calorie diet, which may not match your daily calorie needs. (Men aged 50 or younger, women 30 or younger, and active women of any age may need to eat more than 2,000 calories a day; older men and older or less active women may need fewer than 2,000. To find your calorie needs, use the online calculator at www.mayoclinic.com/health/calorie-calculator/NU00598.)

Even if you have different daily calorie needs, the Percent DV is still useful in helping you choose what to buy, especially when you are comparing two similar products. It lets you see whether a food contains a lot of a particular nutrient, or just a little. If a food's Percent DV for a particular nutrient is 5% or less, it is considered low in that nutrient. You want to look for a lower Percent DV for total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium. If a food has 20% or more of a nutrient, it is considered high in that nutrient. Choose foods with a high Percent DV for fiber, vitamins A and C, calcium, and iron. Labels do not currently list a Percent DV for *trans* fat, protein, or sugar.

4. D. Both naturally occurring and added sugars are listed as sugar on the nutrition label. You can find sugar as a subcategory of carbohydrate, below dietary fiber. In general, you want to look for

foods that have more fiber and less sugar; however, you can't always rely on that rule. Many healthful foods, such as milk, yogurt, and fruit, have naturally occurring sugars. With these foods, even though the amount of sugar on the label may be higher than the amount of fiber, the food is still a healthy choice.

The sugar you want to keep to a minimum is added sugar. You can tell if a food contains added sugar by checking the ingredient list for words such as brown rice syrup, corn syrup, crystalline fructose, dextrin, dextrose, evaporated cane juice, fructose, fruit juice, fruit juice concentrate, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, maltose, maple syrup, molasses, sorghum, sucrose, and, of course, sugar. Also look for the suffix *-ose*, which denotes sugar.

5. D. It's most important to look at the amount of saturated and *trans* fats. Saturated fats raise blood levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, the "bad" kind that can raise the risk of cardiovascular disease. *Trans* fats not only raise LDL cholesterol but also lower high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, the "good" kind that helps to protect against cardiovascular disease. Monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats, on the other hand, are good for heart health; they lower LDL cholesterol.

You should limit the calories you get from *trans* fat to no more than 1% of your total daily calories. That means that if you need 1,800 calories a day, you should take in less than 2 grams of *trans* fat a day. For saturated fat, the recommended limit is 7% of total daily calories—a limit of 14 grams if you eat 1,800 calories a day.

In general, you want to choose foods that contain more unsaturated fats than saturated fats. It's optional for monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats to appear on Nutrition Facts panels, so you won't always find them listed. But you can always check the amount of saturated fat and compare it with the amount of total fat. For example, if a food has 5 grams of saturated fat, 0 grams of *trans* fat, and 13 grams of total fat, then you know the remaining 8 grams of fat come from monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fats.

6. FALSE. Surprisingly, just because the Nutrition Facts panel shows 0 grams of *trans* fats does not mean the food is completely free of these fats. The FDA's food labeling regulations require foods that contain less than 0.5 grams of *trans* fat per serving to list 0 grams on the label. Half a gram of *trans* fat may not seem like a big deal, but if you eat multiple servings of a food, those small amounts can add up.

So how do you know whether you're eating *trans* fats? Read the ingredient list. The term "partially hydrogenated" is an indicator of *trans* fats. *Trans* fats typically lurk in shelf-stable products, such as vegetable shortenings, crackers, cookies, and snack foods. You'll also find them in stick margarine and many fried foods.

This column was written by Jessica Fishman Levinson, MS, RD, CDN, a registered dietitian and founder of Nutritioulicious™, a private practice in New York City. You can read her nutrition blog at www.nutritioulicious.com.