



# Current Perspective on Nutrition Labelling

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The nutrition information found on food packages can help grocery shoppers make more-informed choices. Learning how to read a food label – and more importantly, how to understand a food label – can help you shop smarter, eat healthier and make more-nutritious choices for your family. Not sure where to begin? Read on to learn more.

## The regulated label information

On a recent trip to the grocery store, a shopper looking at a low-fat product was overheard saying, “Why should I believe this is *really* low in fat? They’re just saying that to sell more products.” This shopper is mistaken. Claims like “low in fat” are regulated and cannot be used unless they meet certain conditions set out by the government, as outlined in the *Food and Drugs Act and Regulations*. These regulations ensure that you can trust the Nutrition Facts table and the nutrition and health claims that are found on packaged foods.

The following food label information falls under these regulations:

### Nutrition Facts table

With its standard formats, the Nutrition Facts table is easy to find, read and understand (see example on page 3). Packaged foods must show the amount of calories and amount of 13 core nutrients for a specific serving size of food. Some products may show other nutrients beyond the core 13 (such as vitamin D or omega-3 fat).

### Examples of nutrient content claims

- Source of fibre
- Low in fat
- Salt-free
- No sugar added
- Low calorie
- Trans fat-free
- Source of calcium

### Nutrient content claims

Some product packages contain phrases to highlight a nutrition feature of a food, such as “salt-free” or “source of iron.” These are called nutrient content claims. Products must meet specific criteria in order to make these claims. When grocery shopping, you can use these claims along with the Nutrition Facts table to help you make better choices (see example on page 3).


### Health claims

Certain diet-related health claims and biological role claims can be made on packaged foods that meet strict criteria. Diet-related health claims refer to the reduction of the risk of disease. Look for the following helpful diet-related health claims currently permitted on packaged foods:

- A healthy diet low in saturated and trans fats may reduce the risk of heart disease.
- A healthy diet with adequate calcium and vitamin D, and regular physical activity, help to achieve strong bones and may reduce the risk of osteoporosis.
- A healthy diet rich in a variety of vegetables and fruit may help reduce the risk of some types of cancer.
- A healthy diet containing foods high in potassium and low in sodium may reduce the risk of high blood pressure, a risk factor for stroke and heart disease.

Biological role claims refer to the maintenance or support of specific body functions. An example is, “DHA, an omega-3 fatty acid, supports the normal development of the brain, eyes and nerves.”

Remember that if a nutrition or health claim is used, the Nutrition Facts table must also be given. While claims are a good starting point, the Nutrition Facts gives more-complete information about the nutrient value of a food.





### Symbols: highly visible tools

CCFN's 2006 [Tracking Nutrition Trends \(TNT\) survey](#) found that 80% of Canadians want food packages to clearly indicate products that are "healthier."

The key to finding healthier products is to read food labels and know which information to rely on. The Nutrition Facts table is reliable, but it's not the first item that grocery shoppers see as it usually appears on the back or side of a package. Many symbols (like the ones pictured below) are now seen on the front of packaged foods. Of Canadians who read food labels, almost half (47%) look for these types of symbols when making food choices.



### How to use symbols wisely

Symbols can be helpful because they bring your attention to products that may be healthier choices. If used correctly, these symbols can help you make wise choices at the grocery store.

- To use symbols correctly, you'll need to understand what they mean. Is the symbol highlighting one nutrient, like fibre? Or does it include an overview of many nutrients, like salt, sugar and fibre?
- Be sure not to rely solely on the symbol as your criteria for making a purchase. Instead, use the symbol along with the **Nutrition Facts table** and **list of ingredients** to get the real story on a food. For example, if a symbol indicates that the product is a good choice, check the Nutrition Facts table to see the actual sodium, fat, sugar and fibre content before you buy it.

Here is some advice to consider when looking at symbols on packaged foods:

- Symbols come from a variety of food companies and non-profit organizations, so they do not share one standard set of nutrition criteria. This means that the health benefits of two products cannot be compared using only the symbols as a guide. The Nutrition Facts tables should be used to make direct comparisons.
- The symbols may point out some health benefits of a product but may not reflect other less healthy features. For example, a product may have a symbol to show that it is low in fat and high in fibre, but the product could also be high in salt, which the symbol may not show.
- Some products, such as baked chips or lower-fat cookies, may carry a symbol to indicate that they are a healthier choice than their full-fat counterparts. Before you buy, remember to consider how the food fits into your overall diet. Portion sizes are still important even if it's a "healthier" choice.
- Products with symbols may not be the only healthy choices in a particular category of foods. Many products without symbols are healthy choices as well, so check the Nutrition Facts tables before you make a purchase.

#### How one family uses symbols to make healthier choices at the grocery store

The Leigh family likes to enjoy nachos on Saturday nights, but Mrs. Leigh is worried about the high salt and fat content.

This Saturday, she tries something different. She buys baked tortillas, low fat sour cream, sodium-reduced salsa, extra-lean ground beef and reduced fat cheese. She looks for products with symbols or nutrient content claims to indicate that they are healthier choices, and then compares products using the Nutrition Facts table. Her family still enjoys the Saturday treat, but with less fat and salt than usual.





### Canada's next steps for symbols

Government regulations do not set out the specific criteria for the use of symbols. However, these symbols imply a health claim and so they must comply with overall regulations to be truthful and not misleading. Diverse symbols with different criteria may be confusing. Recognizing this, Health Canada is looking at ways to solve the problem while revising its health claims rules. Health Canada has finished a consultation on health claims, and plans to undertake research on how grocery shoppers use the symbols. Here are some of Health Canada's ideas to help consumers make wise food choices:

- Educate consumers on how to use the Nutrition Facts table and ingredient listings along with the symbols and claims.
- Provide guidance to industry on conditions and wording that would help ensure that claims are not misleading.

To learn more, see Health Canada's discussion paper, *Managing Health Claims for Foods in Canada*, at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/consultation/init/management\\_health\\_claims-allegations\\_sante-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/consultation/init/management_health_claims-allegations_sante-eng.php)

### How reading food labels can help

Everyone, regardless of age, gender, or overall health, can benefit from reading food labels. Here's an example of how food labels can help.

Nutrition Facts	
Per 1 cup (55 g)	
Amount	% Daily Value
<b>Calories</b> 220	
<b>Fat</b> 2 g	3 %
Saturated 0 g	0 %
+ Trans 0 g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0 mg	
<b>Sodium</b> 270 mg	11 %
<b>Carbohydrate</b> 44 g	15 %
Fibre 8 g	32 %
Sugars 16 g	
<b>Protein</b> 6 g	
Vitamin A 0 %	Vitamin C 0 %
Calcium 4 %	Iron 40 %

Ms. Bear is at the grocery store to shop for her entire family, including her elderly father. On today's trip, she needs to find a high fibre cereal for her dad. She looks at the cereal boxes and sees one with a symbol and the nutrient content claim "high in fibre."

She's on the right track, but to learn more about the fibre content and the other nutrients that the cereal contains, she looks at the Nutrition Facts table.

Here's what she sees on the Nutrition Facts table:

1. The serving size listed in the table is for one cup, so Ms. Bear knows that all of the information on the Nutrition Facts table is for one cup of cereal. If her dad eats two cups of cereal, she knows that she has to multiply everything by two.
2. Ms. Bear sees that the cereal contains 220 calories per 1 cup serving.
3. Ms. Bear will use the column called % Daily Value to decide if there is a lot or a little of each nutrient in 1 cup of cereal. For example, she knows the scale is out of 100, so 3% of the Daily Value for fat is quite low, while 40% of the Daily Value for iron is high (see page 4 for more information about %DV).
4. Ms. Bear's dad has heart disease, so she is careful to buy him foods that are low in saturated and trans fat. This product is a good choice because it has no saturated or trans fat.
5. Ms. Bear sees that this product has 8 grams of fibre, but she can't remember if that is a lot or a little. As a reminder, she looks at the % Daily Value, and sees that 1 cup of cereal provides 32% of the Daily Value for fibre, or roughly one third of the fibre her dad will need for the day. That's a good amount!



### Percent Daily Value—a very useful tool!

The % Daily Value (% DV) puts nutrients on a scale from 0 to 100% to show you if there is a *little* or a *lot* of a nutrient in one serving of food. Even if you don't know the exact amount of a nutrient that you need each day, you can use % DV to quickly see if the product has a lot or a little of any nutrient. For example, a food that has a % DV of 15% or more for calcium, vitamin A, iron or fibre would be high in these nutrients.

% Daily Value can help you make healthier choices:

- Look for products that have a lower % DV for sodium, saturated fat and trans fat.
- Look for products that have a higher % DV for fibre, calcium, iron, vitamin A and vitamin C.

The % DV lets you easily compare two products to see which choice is better for you. For example, if you are looking for a high calcium snack, you can compare the % DV for different options and choose one with a higher % DV for calcium.

### How to make healthier choices

Follow [Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide](#) to plan a healthy diet. Use the nutrition information on food packages to compare products more easily and find information about the nutrient content of foods.

#### As a general rule, choose foods that have LESS:

- **Fat and cholesterol**—Look for lower overall fat content, and look for foods with as little saturated and trans fat as possible.
- **Sodium**—Sodium, or salt, is often used in packaged foods to enhance flavour and prolong shelf-life. Look for foods with as little sodium as possible.
- **Sugars**—Canada's Food Guide recommends eating foods lower in sugar to help limit extra calories in the diet. No % DV has been set because there's no recognized guideline on the amount of sugars that should be consumed by healthy populations. The amount on the label includes naturally occurring and added sugars. Compare foods and choose the ones that have less sugar.

#### Choose foods that have MORE:

- **Fibre**—We need 25 to 35 grams of fibre each day, so choose foods that have a higher fibre content.
- **Vitamins and minerals**—These essential nutrients are factors in the maintenance of good health.

#### Become label-savvy!

- ♦ Virtual Grocery Store, part of the nutrition labelling website by Dietitians of Canada and the Canadian Diabetes Association  
[www.healthyeatinginstore.ca](http://www.healthyeatinginstore.ca)
- ♦ Interactive Nutrition Label and Quiz, by Health Canada  
[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/nutrition/cons/interactive-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/nutrition/cons/interactive-eng.php)

Looking at claims and symbols is a good starting point when trying to make more-informed food choices. Also remember to check the Nutrition Facts table and list of ingredients to get the most complete information about a food's nutrient content.

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