

Common Mistakes to Avoid When Reading a Food Label

Until you become accustomed to reading food labels, it's easy to become confused. Avoid these common mistakes when reading labels:

- A label may say the food is reduced fat or reduced sodium. That means that the amount of fat or sodium has been reduced by 25% from the original product. It doesn't mean that the food is low in fat or sodium. For example, if a can of soup originally had 1,000 milligrams of sodium, the reduced sodium product would still be a high-sodium food.
- Don't confuse the % DV for fat with the percentage of calories from fat. If the % DV is 15% that doesn't mean that 15% of the calories comes from fat. It means that you're using up 15% of all the fat you need for a day with one serving (based on a meal plan of 2,000 calories per day).
- Sugar on a label does not mean that sugar has been added. For example, milk naturally has sugar, which is called lactose. You should not stop drinking milk because milk is full of other important nutrients including calcium. Look at the list of ingredients. If you see the words high-fructose corn syrup or sugar high on the list of ingredients, it probably means refined sugar has been added to the product.
- Packages dispensed from vending machines, even if the package is small, often contain more than one serving. A small bag of pretzels may contain 2.5 servings. So you need to multiply the numbers by 2.5 to figure out how many calories and the amount of sodium and other nutrients you are eating.

Reading Label Lingo

Here's a list of common phrases you may see on your food packaging - and what they actually mean.

- No fat or fat free: Contains less than 1/2 gram of fat per serving
- Lower or reduced fat: Contains at least 25 percent less per serving than the reference food. (An example might be reduced fat cream cheese, which would have at least 25 percent less fat than original cream cheese.)
- Low fat: Contains less than 3 grams of fat per serving
- Lite: Contains 1/3 the calories or 1/2 the fat per serving of the original version or a similar product
- No calories or calorie free: Contains less than 5 calories per serving
- Low calorie: Contains 1/3 the calories of the original version or a similar product
- Sugar free: Contains less than 1/2 gram of sugar per serving
- Reduced sugar: at least 25% less sugar per serving than the reference food
- No preservatives: Contains no preservatives (chemical or natural)
- No preservatives added: Contains no added chemicals to preserve the product. Some of these products may contain natural preservatives
- Low sodium: contains less than 140 mgs of sodium per serving
- No salt or salt free: Contains less than 5 mgs of sodium per serving
- High fiber: 5 g or more per serving (Foods making high-fiber claims must meet the definition for low fat, or the level of total fat must appear next to the high-fiber claim)
- Good source of fiber: 2.5 g to 4.9 g. per serving
- More or added fiber: Contains at least 2.5 g more per serving than the reference food