

12 Weeks

TO HEALTHY EATING

WEEK FIVE – DECIPHERING THE FOOD LABEL

Learning:

- Serving size
- Calories
- Fat
- Meal and snack structure
- Daily food choice recommendations

We have explored the macronutrient composition of food, portion sizes, serving sizes and the recommendations for a healthy diet. Now it is your turn to put your personalized plan in place. Start small and allow yourself to make slow, gradual changes for the greatest success. Learn how to select healthy food choices to meet your needs. How would you describe a healthy diet? What guidelines would you set for yourself? How does this compare to your current eating habits?

An important part of eating healthy is learning how to select healthy food options. When was the last time you read a food label? What did you notice? What information do you use to make healthy choices? What foods do not contain food labels? How do you determine if these foods are a healthy choice?

Steps to decipher the food label

Reading the nutrition facts panel can be a daunting task if you do not know what you are looking for. With the right information you will be on your way to selecting healthy choices.

1. Serving size

Serving sizes are listed in standard, household measurements, such as cups, items or pieces and grams. The number of servings per package is also listed. The serving size is important because all of the nutritional information listed on the nutrition fact panel is the amount per the listed serving size. If you eat more than the indicated serving size, you have to multiply all of the information listed by the number of servings you eat. Keep in mind the serving size is not necessarily the amount you should eat. You can compare two products with similar servings to determine which will be a healthier choice.

2. Calories

If you are trying to lose or maintain your weight, the number of calories you eat each day is extremely important. To lose weight you need to eat fewer calories than your body burns each day. Individuals looking to gain weight will need to consume more calories than the body burns each day. Keep in mind it takes 3,500 calories to lose or gain a pound. To effectively lose or gain one pound per week you must create a 500-calorie difference each day for a week; a two-pound weight loss or gain per week requires a 1,000 calorie difference each day. You can use the labels to compare similar products and determine which contain fewer calories. You can also determine the percentage of calories that come from fat in that particular food. To find out how many calories you need each day, contact a health expert or utilize online resources including the Mifflin-St. Jeor equation. In general, in terms of calories per serving (for a 2,000 calorie diet), 40 is low, 100 is moderate and 400 or more is high.

3. Total fat

Total fat tells you how much fat is in the food per serving. Fat is calorie dense and therefore foods that are high in fat are also high in calories. Keep in mind, not all fat is created equal. Total fat includes saturated, trans, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Healthy fats, e.g., poly- and monounsaturated fats, are needed in the diet in a very small amount each and every day and can help improve your blood cholesterol. Our bodies only need about two to three tablespoons of healthy fats per day. Saturated and trans fats can raise your bad cholesterol, lower your good, heart healthy cholesterol and increase your risk of heart disease.

Choose foods low in total fat, saturated fat and trans fats.

4. Sodium

Extremely high amounts of sodium are found in processed foods, such as soups, salad dressings, sauces, preserved foods (e.g., pickles, olives or bacon) and packaged foods (e.g., crackers and nuts). Adults should aim to consume less than 2,300 mg per day and even less for those individuals with high blood pressure; one teaspoon is 2,400 mg. Most people get an abundance of sodium in the diet. A small amount of sodium is found naturally in foods and can be added to foods at the table and in cooking for flavour. However, the majority of sodium we get in our diet is from the salt already in processed foods.

Look for foods with low or reduced sodium as sodium is directly correlated to blood pressure.

5. Carbohydrates

Total carbohydrates indicate the total amount of sugars, starches and fibres combined in that product. Carbohydrates are the preferred energy source for the body and the mind. It is important to consume a certain amount of carbohydrate to allow for adequate energy for the body and mind. Carbohydrates get broken down into glucose in the body, which is the main energy source for the brain. However, not all carbohydrates are created equal. Carbohydrates are found in grains and breads, fruits, vegetables and small amounts in dairy, nuts and beans. Carbohydrates found naturally in whole grains, fruits and vegetables provide an abundance of vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals. Processed foods containing added sugars, such as candy, will provide carbohydrates without the important micronutrients. Fibre, sugar and sugar alcohols are all types of carbohydrates. Fibre is a component found in plant-based foods that is partially indigestible. Fibre is important to maintain a healthy digestive system and soluble fibre can help to lower your LDL cholesterol.

Women should aim for 25 grams of fibre per day while men should aim for at least 38 grams per day.

Carbohydrates have a direct effect on your blood sugar, but fibre takes longer to digest and absorb, and will help to create a more gradual energy release. Aim to maximize the amount of fibre and minimize the amount of added sugars in the products you select. Keep in mind fruits, vegetables and dairy products might seem high in sugar, but these are naturally occurring sugars and are an extremely important part of a healthy diet! Read the ingredient list to determine where the sugar might be coming from.

6. Protein

The main role of protein is to repair and rebuild muscles and tissues. The average person only needs about 0.8 grams per kg body weight of protein. Protein is found in high amounts in meats, dairy, cheese, fish, beans, nuts, seeds, eggs and tofu. Protein takes longer to digest and absorb and may contribute to a greater feeling of fullness and a more sustained energy release. Use the grams of protein found on food labels to meet your recommended protein needs per day!

7. Ingredient list

The ingredient list provides an abundance of extremely important information for you to use to select healthy products. The ingredients are listed in descending order by weight; therefore, the first few ingredients make up the largest proportion of the food. Check to see how many ingredients are listed in this product. Think realistically about how many ingredients this product should contain and what should be the number one ingredient in the product? For example, what should be the first ingredient in peanut butter? How many ingredients should be in peanut butter? Answer: peanuts should be the first and only ingredient in peanut butter. Tomatoes should be the first ingredient in ketchup and milk should be the first ingredient in yogurt. Scan the ingredients for healthy words, such as whole grain, and words you cannot pronounce. Aim to consume products with the least number of ingredients and products where you understand and can pronounce each ingredient listed.

Also, look for the word hydrogenated or partially-hydrogenated, which indicate the product contains trans fats, even if the grams of trans fats is listed as zero. Understand every ingredient in the foods you eat!

8. % Daily Value

The percent daily value indicates the percent of each nutrient you are consuming based on a 2,000 calorie diet. You may be consuming more or less than 2,000 calories per day; therefore, these may not be the percent daily value for your diet. The percent daily value can be used to compare the amount of certain nutrients in food products and used to select foods with less saturated fat, cholesterol, trans fat and sodium or a higher percentage of fibre.

In general, 5% or less of a nutrient is low while 15% or more of a nutrient is high.

Don't be confused by other words on the package. "Free" means the food has the least possible amount of a nutrient while "very low" or "low" indicates the food has a small amount of a specific nutrient. "Reduced" or "less" indicates the food has 25% less of a specific nutrient compared to the regular food.

Aim to consume foods higher in fibre, vitamin A, calcium, iron and vitamin C. Aim to consume foods lower in total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and sodium.

You now have the tools to make healthy choices for your diet. Keep these important tips in mind as you head into the holiday season!

Self-exploration exercises

Now that you know the information above, what aspects of the nutrition facts panel might be important for you to consider based on your current health status and goals? How will you evaluate and define “healthy choices” when you select food products?

Select five foods from your house and review the nutrition facts panel.

What do you see?

What is important for you to consider?

Why or why not is this product healthy?

What would make this product a healthier choice for you?

Goal setting: Set SMART goals to work on for the next week

A key point to any successful plan is to complete and review your goals on an ongoing basis. Complete the following goals sheet. Putting pen to paper on what you want and need, your obstacles, challenges and back- up plan is key to long-term positive change.

Prepare a grocery shopping list for this week. What products might you spend additional time selecting by comparing the nutrition facts panel of similar products? Great products to compare include cereals, breads, crackers, canned goods, yogurts, cheese, sauces, dressings and marinades.

Evaluate where you are at in terms of reaching your short-term goals.

Where are you in terms of the goals you have previously set?

How might you re-evaluate and reset your short-term goals?

What is one small thing you could do today to keep on track to accomplish your short-term goal?

Based on the information you have learned on the nutrition facts panel and the components that might be important for you, write two goals for your food selection this week.

Example:

1. Go grocery shopping and carry out your food selection goals.
2. Keep a food diary this week.

What will you focus on this week?

1. _____

2. _____