

How To Read Food Labels

by Sally on January 2, 2015

in [Basics and How-To](#), [Food For Thought](#), [The Daniel Plan](#)



The New Year is a great time to recommit to your journey to a healthier life. And learning to read food labels is crucial skill to accomplish that goal. In fact, it might just save your life. Whether shopping for groceries or cleaning out your pantry, here are tips on how to read labels.

Why Read Food Labels

Reading labels will help you understand what you are putting into your body, allowing you to make smarter choices. Why bother? Because food is not just fuel – it's medicine. Learn to read labels and choose foods that heal instead of harm.

Food and Labels

Ideally, our focus is foods without labels such as fresh, whole vegetables and fruit. Foods grown on a plant, not made in a plant are our healthiest options.

But many healthy foods do come in cans, packages, or frozen. Think of canned tomatoes, beans, coconut milk, canned pumpkin, nuts, intact whole grains and seeds like quinoa and rice, and frozen berries. These foods that are pantry staples that help us get meals made when time is short or items are out of season.

How to Read Labels

Whether you are shopping at the market or cleaning out your pantry, start by reading the ingredient list.

- Ingredients are listed in terms of proportion. The first ingredient listed is the primary and most abundant ingredient. The rest of the ingredients are listed in descending order by weight. The top three ingredients are mostly what you are eating.
- Look for labels with five or less ingredients. If it has more than five, put it back or toss it (there are exceptions).
- If a label starts with sugar, salt or something unhealthy, put it back or toss it.
- Look for labels that you can understand what the ingredients actually are. Ingredients that your grandmother would recognize, not something from a chemistry class.
- Can't pronounce it, look for other options or toss it.

The Big, Bad Ingredients to Watch For and Eliminate

- *Partially hydrogenated oils* or hydrogenated oils – the damaging trans fats. Don't believe the label if it says zero grams. Read the ingredient label. Manufacturers are allowed to round down if there is a half gram or less, so there still might be trans fats. Zero in our diet is the goal.
- *High Fructose Corn Syrup*. Always the warning for low quality, processed foods and a toxic, deadly sweetener.
- Added *Monosodium Glutamate* (MSG), a chemical flavor enhancer. Look for anything hydrolyzed, autolyzed, yeast extract, glutamic acid, soy protein isolate and many more. It's another hidden threat to our health. See the link below for a site that provides a great list.
- *Watch the sugar*. Understand that 4 grams = 1 teaspoon. Sugar goes by many names such as organic cane juice, honey, agave syrup, molasses, sucrose, brown rice syrup, corn syrup solids, to name a few.
- *Carrageenan*. An unnecessary "natural" food additive made from seaweed that adds texture to foods.
- *Hidden sugars*. Anything that ends in "ose" such as maltose, dextrose, or sucrose.
- *Artificial* colors and flavors. Toss the fake stuff.
- [Artificial sweeteners](#). Toss things with Splenda, Aspartame, sucralose, and most sugar alcohols that end in "ol". For some, they cause problems with digestion, may increase hunger, and slow your metabolism.
- *"Natural" flavorings*. They are anything but natural.
- *Nitrites and nitrates*, often found in cured meats like deli meats, hot dogs, sausages, bacon and linked to cancer.
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Look at the Nutrition Label

Reading nutrition labels can be confusing, but there is information there you should be aware of.

- Is the serving size realistic? Often not.
- Be wary of sugar content. Four grams = 1 teaspoon of sugar.
- Be wary of high sodium levels, a flag for highly processed foods. Guidelines say most of us should get no more than 2300 milligrams per day, and for many on a sodium restricted diet, it could be 1500 milligrams or less. Another example is sodium where it's just not necessary. I went to buy a whole chicken this week and tried to save time going to a closer market (Trader Joes versus Whole Foods). Trader Joe's whole organic chicken had 20% added sodium solution – over 500 milligrams per 4 ounce serving. I put it back and drive further to get one that had zero added sodium.
- Labeling for allergy or sensitivity-inducing ingredients is often hidden. Look for ingredients such as eggs, dairy, soy, gluten, peanuts, tree nuts just to name a few. Labeling for hidden gluten is whole other post by itself.

Other Label Reading Tips

- Beware of health food claims and healthy names on front labels. Marketers try to convince us that their products are healthy to get us to buy when they may not be healthy at all. That marketing spin may be hiding some unhealthy truth. If a can or package has a health claim, put it back (or read hard).
- Unfamiliar ingredients? Look them up at [Chemical Cuisine](#) or type them into your search engine.
- When choosing canned foods, look for BPA-free cans. BPA is a synthetic estrogen and industrial chemical that leaches into food and drink from food cans and polycarbonate plastics. BPA disrupts our hormone levels and balance.

- See more at: <http://afoodcentriclife.com/25312/#sthash.8wgjWadM.dpuf>