HOW TO READ A FOOD LABEL

Label terms that have no meaning or are misleading:

1. All natural
2. Low-Fat
3. No Trans Fat
4. Extra light
5. No added...
6. Plus... (think toaster pastries)
7. A good source of fiber
8. Strengthens your immune system
9. Made with REAL fruit, cheese, etc.
10. Made with whole grains
11. Multi-grain
12. Lightly sweetened
13. Low sugar

The Eating Rules Guide to the Nutrition Facts Panel

Once you get in the habit of reading nutrition labels, it becomes like a game. If you know what to look for, you'll start to see patterns emerge and will be able to tell very quickly if a food is good for you or if it's full of junk. So ignore all the marketing claims on the front, flip the box over, and check out the nutrition facts. To see how I do it, read on – starting with #1 in the lower-left corner down there.

Once You Pop You Can't Stop...

There are no precise rules about what companies can say constitutes a "serving," so it's sometimes hard to compare products. They are, however, required to show the number of servings per container (not indicated on this sample label). **Be realistic about how many servings you're actually going to eat.**

Cramming in the Calories.

Now that you followed step #3 you know how many you can eat each day. In this product, if you eat one pastry, you'll be eating 1/10 of your entire day's calories. Is that worth it? You decide. TIP: **A snack should probably be no more than around 200 calories.**

So...so...Sodium.

Sadly, most packaged foods have waaaaaay too much sodium. **If a product has more milligrams of sodium than it does calories, it's probably too high.** TIP: Breads and soups are the worst offenders, so watch those extra carefully.

Fiber is Fabulous.

It's generally true that the more *naturally-occurring* fiber in a food, the better it is for you. But beware: Manufacturers now add fiber to many products, and there's no distinction on the label. If you see inulin, polydextrose, maltodextrin, or modified wheat starch in the ingredients list, it's got added fiber. Though it's not likely to hurt, and may indeed be good, the benefits of this extra fiber are not yet proven. **Aim to eat 25-35 grams of naturally-occurring fiber every day from whole grains and fresh fruits & vegetables.**

Partake in Some Protein.

Dietary recommendations on protein vary widely, but the easiest guideline I've found is to aim for about ½ gram of protein per pound of body weight each day. (Example: A 160-pound person should eat about 80 grams a day). Remember, it's important get your protein from a variety of sources. Look for beans & legumes, whole grains, low-fat dairy, and smaller portions of lean meats.

Read the Ingredients!

If you read nothing else on the label, at least read the ingredients list. This is the best way to know what you're putting in your body. Ingredients must be sorted by order of descending quantity, so there's more of the first ingredient than any other single ingredient. Some ingredients may have sub-ingredients (such as the enriched flour shown here), and different types of sugar can be listed separately. Here, enriched flour is followed by Corn Syrup, High Fructose Corn Syrup, and Dextrose. It's very likely that there's actually more sugar than flour in this product.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 Pastry (52g)

Amount Per Serving	
Calories 200	Calories from Fat 45
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 5g	**8%**
Saturated Fat 1.5g	**8%**
Trans Fat 0g	
Polyunsaturated Fat 2g	
Monounsaturated Fat 1g	
Cholesterol 0mg	**0%**
Sodium 160mg	**7%**
Total Carbohydrate 38g	**13%**
Dietary Fiber less than 1g	**2%**
Sugars 18g	
Protein 2g	

Vitamin A 10% • Vitamin C 0% • Calcium 0% • Iron 10%
Thiamin 10% • Riboflavin 10% • Niacin 10% • Vitamin B_6 10%
Folic Acid 10%

* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

	Calories	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Saturated Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Calories per gram: Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4

INGREDIENTS: ENRICHED FLOUR (WHEAT FLOUR, NIACIN, REDUCED IRON, THIAMIN MONONITRATE [VITAMIN B_1], RIBOFLAVIN [VITAMIN B_2], FOLIC ACID), CORN SYRUP, HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP, DEXTROSE, SOYBEAN AND PALM OIL (WITH TBHQ FOR FRESHNESS), SUGAR, CRACKER MEAL, CONTAINS TWO PERCENT OR LESS OF WHEAT STARCH, SALT, DRIED CHERRIES, DRIED APPLES, CORNSTARCH, LEAVENING (BAKING SODA, SODIUM ACID PYROPHOSPHATE, MONOCALCIUM PHOSPHATE), CITRIC ACID, GELATIN, MODIFIED WHEAT STARCH, CARAMEL COLOR, XANTHAN GUM, SOY LECITHIN, CALCIUM STEARATE, VITAMIN A PALMITATE, RED #40, NIACINAMIDE, REDUCED IRON, NATURAL FLAVOR, RED #40 LAKE, PYRIDOXINE HYDROCHLORIDE (VITAMIN B_6), YELLOW #5, CARNAUBA WAX, RIBOFLAVIN (VITAMIN B_2), THIAMIN HYDROCHLORIDE (VITAMIN B_1), CONFECTIONER'S GLAZE, FOLIC ACID, BLUE #1.

CONTAINS WHEAT AND SOY INGREDIENTS.

No Trans-Fatties!

Not all fats are bad (and some are even good), and eating fat doesn't necessarily mean you'll get fat. Avoid man-made trans fats like the plague, and watch out for the trans fat loophole: If a food has partially-hydrogenated or hydrogenated oils in the ingredients, it has trans fats! (The number shown can be rounded down to zero). **Polyunsaturated fats are the good stuff, but mono-unsaturated fats are okay, too.** TIP: Fat has 9 calories per gram (carbs and protein each have around 4), so more fat does mean more calories.

Some of the Sweet Stuff.

Unfortunately, the nutrition label doesn't distinguish between naturally-occurring sugars and added sugars, so it's simplest just to assume less is better. TIP: There's about 4 grams of sugar in a teaspoon of regular table sugar, so **divide the number shown on the label by 4 and visualize that many teaspoons of sugar.** Still hungry?

Vitameatavegamin ?

Of course it's important to get your daily dose of vitamins and minerals, but I don't usually give this area more than a passing glance. Are you really going to sit there and tally up your vitamin and mineral intake? If you know you're deficient in a particular one (or more), then you should definitely do it. But otherwise, if you're going to count something, it's probably more worthwhile to count calories. **Eat a lot of different whole fruits & veggies, and you'll do better than trying to get all your vitamins and minerals from a packaged food.**

Memorize this part and you won't have to read it next time, I promise.

The "footer" information is identical on every label. Although it's generic, it works well as a basic guideline. **In general, women should consume around 2,000 calories a day, and men around 2,500.** (Many factors influence this number, including gender, age, activity level, general health, etc., but this is a good place to start.) Memorize the appropriate column for you. Got it? Okay, good. Move on to #3 up there at the top.