Our client, Heidi, who is living with heart disease.

2.14.22 / Nutrition

Following Your Heart: Reading Nutrition Labels

By The Nutrition Services Department

How often do you read a nutrition label before purchasing an item at the grocery store or diving into a bag of chips? The nutrition label can tell you a lot more about a food than just the number of calories. In the spirit of National Heart Health Month, let’s go through how to read a nutrition label with your heart health in mind. The main areas to identify are the number of servings, total fat, saturated fat, sodium, fiber, and added sugar.

Number of Servings
The number of servings is listed at the very top of a nutrition label. This is an important item to identify because it will dictate if the amount of the fat, carbohydrate, and protein listed would need to be multiplied. For example, a food item may list 230 calories, 8 g of fat, 1 g of saturated fat, 160 mg of sodium, 10 g of added sugar. However, if the bag contains 8 servings, that means consuming the entire bag would yield 1840 calories, 64 g of fat, 8 g of saturated fat, 1280 mg of sodium, and 80 g of added sugar were consumed. This is almost an entire day’s worth of calories, fat, and sodium. Paying attention to serving sizes can prevent you from accidently consuming more than you intended.

**Total Fat and Saturated Fat**

The next items to look for are total fat and saturated fat. The total fat consists of the amount of saturated and unsaturated fat in the food.
Saturated fats are typically solid at room temperature and are often found in animal products such as beef, pork, full-fat dairy products, and coconut oil. These fats can contribute to increased cholesterol, inflammation, and the risk of heart disease. For optimal heart health, the USDA recommends consuming no more than 5-6% of daily calories as saturated fat (about 120 calories or 13 g per day if following a 2000 calorie diet).

Unsaturated fats are typically liquid at room temperature. These fats, often referred to as “healthy fats,” are commonly found in fish, nuts, avocados and vegetable oils. One of the best forms of unsaturated fat for heart health is called an omega-3 fatty acid. Omega-3 fatty acids are found in high amounts salmon, mackerel, walnuts, flaxseed and olive oil. These omega-3 fatty acids tend to reduce inflammation and the risk of heart disease.

When scanning a nutrition label, look at the composition of the fat. Is it mostly saturated fat or unsaturated fat? The American Heart Association suggests limiting foods high in saturated fat and replacing them with foods containing unsaturated fat. Total daily fat intake should make up about 15-20% of daily calories (about 30-45g per day if following a 2000 calorie diet).

**Sodium**

After fat, the next item to be mindful of when eating a heart healthy diet is sodium. Sodium is a mineral that is present in the body and necessary for survival. However, consuming too much sodium can lead to increased blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular disease. It is commonly found in table salt but can also be found in high amounts in heavily processed foods. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2300 mg of sodium per day while moving towards a goal of 1500 mg of sodium per day for most adults.

**Fiber**
The next item to look for is dietary fiber. The more fiber the better! Fiber is usually found in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Fiber can aid in gut motility, serves as food for beneficial bacteria in the colon, and helps to promote anti-inflammatory pathways in the body. Dietary fiber can help to improve blood cholesterol levels and thereby decrease the risk of cardiovascular disease. Fiber also makes foods more filling which can help to prevent overeating and improve satiety after a meal. It is recommended that people eat 25-30g of fiber per day. When adding fiber to the diet, be sure to increase intake gradually and slowly. Too much fiber too quickly can cause gastrointestinal discomfort.

**Added Sugar**
There are two types of sugar represented on a nutrition label: natural sugar and added sugar. Natural sugars occur naturally in foods such as fruit or milk (lactose). Added sugars are any caloric sweetener that is added to foods such as table sugar (sucrose), honey, corn syrup, maple syrup, or agave. A nutrition label will usually list Total Sugar and Added Sugar. The American Heart Association recommends limiting added sugar to less than 5% of daily calories (less than 25g per day). Although sugar isn’t dangerous to eat, in large amounts, it can lead to excess calorie intake and an increased risk of obesity and diabetes.

There’s more to unlock from nutrition labels than calories and carbohydrates when it comes to your health. With a simple scan, it’s possible to evaluate if a food is heart healthy or maybe one to eat in moderation. Eating for your heart health doesn’t have to mean eliminating favorite foods from your diet. It’s about creating a pattern of eating that includes mostly whole foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins with room for those special meals and treats.

All images courtesy AdobeStock.com

Sources for this article were:

Related Posts
Following Your Heart: Reading Nutrition Labels

How often do you read a nutrition label before purchasing an item at the grocery store or diving into a bag of chips? The nutrition label can tell you a lot more about a food than just the number of calories. In the spirit o...

Taking Stress off Client Jose’s Plate
As a single parent living with diabetes and other compounding conditions, Jose believes God's Love came into his life at a pivotal moment in time. About three years ago, Jose's 13-year-old son, Elias, lost his mother. Although...

2021 Year in Review: By the Numbers

As we look back on 2021, we do so with immense gratitude and love. From delivering 20,000 special holiday meals, to our staff members being featured in the NYC Food Policy 40 under 40 list, take a few minutes to reflect on o...