



WHO

HO KNOWS WHAT A

gram is? Europeans and cocaine dealers, that's who. But not law-abiding Americans, unless they happen to be dietitians, like me. I know that 5 grams (g) is about a teaspoon. So whenever I pick up a frozen dinner with 10 g saturated fat listed on the Nutrition Facts label, I see 2 spoonfuls of pallid, artery-clogging fat staring back at me.

These labels started appearing on every item of packaged food in the United States in 1990. At first, the law required a listing of calories, fat, carbohydrates, protein, and sodium. In 1993, saturated fats and cholesterol were added. And in 2006, all labels will list food allergens and trans fats, the dangerous mutant gunk that's formed when food manufacturers turn liquid oils into solid fats so they'll stay stable on grocery-store shelves.

Like most legislation, the labeling law was meant to be helpful. And it has been, mostly. Yet, 14 years later, many people still don't understand how to put the information into practice. Turn the page to find my guide to those labels—your Cliffs Notes for your next supermarket test. »

Before You Pig Out...

Dig into our nutrition-label decoder and never be fooled by cute packaging again

1 SERVING SIZE AND SERVINGS PER CONTAINER

How much food you're consuming.

Don't be fooled: For something that seems so simple, this part of the label can be tricky. What you consider to be one serving may be two or more. This is especially common with bottled beverages, such as iced tea, colas, and sports drinks. So that "100 calories" you glanced at on the label became 250 when you gulped down the whole bottle.

Use it: Serving size is listed at the top of the label for a reason. So read it first. Resist scarfing or chugging. Make sure you understand what a serving is.

2 CALORIES

The measure of energy a food provides.

Don't be fooled: By itself, this number means little. Calorie requirements are like TiVo settings—everyone's are different. Yours depends on your size and lifestyle. But some universal rules do apply. Too many calories and the surplus gets stored as fat. Too few and you lose weight. Or starve.

Use it: Go to MensHealth.com right now and crunch your numbers through the calorie calculator tool. Then remember your recommended intake.

3 CALORIES FROM FAT

The number of calories that come from the food's total fat count.

Don't be fooled: This number can vary greatly. But if you multiply it by three and get a number nearly as big as the total calories, proceed with caution. You'll have more reading to do.

Use it: Hate math? Ignore Calories from Fat and look at Total Fat instead.

4 % DAILY VALUE

The percentage of daily intake the food supplies, based on a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet.

Don't be fooled: You probably need more than 2,000 calories, unless you're an average-size man trying to lose weight. But you're a healthy, active *Men's Health* reader who just checked the calorie counter at MensHealth.com, so... **Ignore it.**

5 TOTAL FAT

The combined total of saturated, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, and trans fats—the stuff that makes food taste good.

Don't be fooled: Something with a lot of grams of fat isn't always bad. Some fats are good for you.

Use it: Look below Total Fat at the number for Saturated Fat. You want to see a ratio that's at

Nutrition Facts
Serving Size 1 cookie (18g)
Servings Per Container About 20

Amount Per Serving

Calories 90 Calories from Fat 40

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 4.5g 7%
Saturated Fat 1g 5%

Cholesterol 0mg 0%

Sodium 70mg 3%

Total Carbohydrate 12g 4%
Dietary Fiber less than 1g 2%

Sugars 8g

Protein 1g

Vitamin A 0% • Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 0% • Iron 4%

*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
Sat 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

INGREDIENTS: SUGAR, PARTIALLY HYDROGENATED SOYBEAN AND COTTONSEED OILS, ENRICHED FLOUR (WHEAT FLOUR, NIACIN, REDUCED IRON, THIAMINE MONONITRATE [VITAMIN B1], RIBOFLAVIN [VITAMIN B2], FOLIC ACID), COCOA (PROCESSED WITH ALKALI), WHEY (FROM MILK), HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP, DEXTROSE, EMULSIFIERS (SOY LECITHIN, SORBITAN TRISTEARATE), BAKING SODA, SALT, CORNSTARCH, PEPPERMINT OIL, CHOCOLATE, VANILLIN - AN ARTIFICIAL FLAVOR.

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least three to one, total to saturated. More specifically, look for 3 g total fat and 1 g saturated fat per 100 calories. So if a frozen dinner has 400 calories and 12 g total fat, that's 3 g per 100 calories.

But now look further: If Monounsaturated and Polyunsaturated Fats are listed below Saturated Fat, the food is probably healthy. Companies don't have to list these healthy fats, so this bragging should encourage you. If you don't see them, though, you'll have to learn a couple of quick analysis tricks to figure out what the balance between Total and Saturated Fat is. (See "Solved!" on page 147.)

In 2006, we'll see Trans Fats listed—avoid these whenever possible.

6 CHOLESTEROL

A fatlike substance in foods from animals.

Don't be fooled: It's not that important. Your body manufactures most of the cholesterol in your system; what food adds is small.

Use it: Don't sweat it, but shoot for 300 milligrams (mg) or less per day.

7 SODIUM

A mineral (salt, basically) usually added for flavor and to help preserve foods.

Don't be fooled: Those big numbers jump out at you—but don't panic.

Use it: Unless you have high blood pressure or are sodium sensitive, use 2,000 mg as a reasonable target for total daily sodium intake. So a frozen dinner with 1,300 mg should go back in the store's freezer. Let some other sucker have it.

8 TOTAL CARBOHYDRATE

All of the sugar, starch, and fiber in a food.

Don't be fooled: The total number isn't very important. It's what kinds of carbohydrates are inside. So...

Ignore it. And keep reading.

9 DIETARY FIBER

The roughage that serves as a pipe cleaner for your digestive and circulatory systems.

Don't be fooled: Fiber comes in two types—soluble and insoluble—and each is crucial to your diet. Because insoluble fiber is digested but not absorbed, it helps you feel full. As it moves along, it keeps the other stuff you've eaten moving along, too. (This property can have a beneficial effect on your waistline. A USDA study found that people who eat 36 g fiber each day essentially lose an extra 130 calories.) And, of the two types, insoluble fiber is much easier to find; just look on the ingredient list for the words "whole grain." You'll also find insoluble fiber in nuts, seeds, and beans.

Soluble fiber moves from the digestive system to the circulatory system, keeping blood vessels lubed so cholesterol won't stick. Top sources include oranges, apples, and oats.

Use it: Any food with 2 g fiber—of any kind—per serving is good. Five grams or more is great. Generally, the higher the fiber count, the healthier the food.

10 SUGARS

The sweet stuff that you eat 150-plus pounds of per year.

Don't be fooled: Not all sugars are the white death your hippie girlfriend claimed. Some are inherent in the foods you eat, like the following: fructose (fruit sugar), glucose (dextrose), galactose (milk sugar), lactose (another milk sugar that blends glucose and galactose), and maltose (malt sugar). You won't find a "sugar-free" milk. These sugars aren't the ones to worry about.

Nutrition

With snack foods or cereals, it's the added sugars that get you into trouble. Sucrose (table sugar) and cane juice inflate the calorie count. High-fructose corn syrup does, too. It's also metabolized into fat faster than other sweeteners and can throw off your body's weight-regulating hormones. Glance at the Ingredients, then back at the Sugars.

Use it: Aim for 5 g or less of sugar per serving.

11 PROTEIN

The amino acids that build and maintain your entire body.

Don't be fooled: Ever meet an American with a protein deficiency? Me either. The only thing you really need to know about protein is that it helps keep you feeling satisfied. Gym rats should top out at 162 to 225 g per day. Thinner guys need no more than 114 g.

Use it: When choosing foods, especially snack foods you'll be tempted to overeat, make sure they contain some protein.

12 VITAMIN AND MINERAL PERCENTAGES

The food's percentage of the minimum



This little piggy went to market.

amounts of nutrients required to prevent various deficiency diseases.

Don't be fooled: All labels must list four basic nutrients: vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron. Others must be listed if they're added as supplements (which is why you see so many on nutrient-fortified breakfast cereals). But remember, these numbers are based on

minimum intakes—the least amount of vitamin C you can consume to avoid coming down with scurvy, for instance. Don't get me wrong—foods with higher DV percentages of nutrients are usually smart choices. But taking a multivitamin with breakfast is the best approach to meeting your vitamin and mineral needs. Do that and you can . . .

Ignore it.

13 INGREDIENTS

What's in the food, arranged in order by weight from most to least.

Don't be fooled: Not every food is as it seems. For example, processed peanut butter contains peanuts, along with extra sugars and molasses for sweeter flavor, partially hydrogenated oils to keep the blend of fats shelf-stable, and mono- and diglycerides, emulsifying fat molecules that help give foods a creamy texture. Natural peanut butter is made with two ingredients: roasted peanuts and salt. No surprises there.

Use it: Criminals such as high-fructose corn syrup and partially hydrogenated oils should occupy fifth place or lower.

MHI

Solved!

The mystery of food labels' fuzzy math

SOMETIMES THE numbers on a nutrition label just don't add up. Here's why.

▷ MYSTERY CARBOHYDRATES

Total Carbohydrate: 25 grams (g)

Dietary Fiber: 4 g

Sugars: 13 g

Mystery Carbohydrates: 8 g

One possible answer: 8 g starch

Your mom called high-carbohydrate foods "starches." Well, starches never went away. Foods like rice, potatoes, and grains (and the breads and chips made from them) still contain the same amount of starch they did before Dr. Atkins turned our attention to the total number of carbohydrates. Starch is similar to fiber—it's a complex carbohydrate, which means that it's composed of long chains of sugar molecules. Unlike fiber, though, starch is fully absorbed by the body. It contains calories and turns to glucose (blood sugar).

Another possible answer: 8 g sugar alcohols

These artificial sweeteners are chemically altered sugar molecules that are derived from plants and go by such names as isomalt, mannitol, maltitol, sorbitol, xylitol, and hydrogenated starch hydrolysates. They contain a small number of calories but manage to pass through the body mostly intact—not always a pleasant experience when you consume large quantities. You'll find them in nearly any food that also bears the marking "low carb."

▷ MYSTERY FATS

Total Fat: 7 g

Saturated Fat: 3 g

Mystery Fats: 4 g

One possible answer: 4 g poly-

monounsaturated fats

Look at the ingredient list. If it mentions things like canola, sunflower, safflower, cottonseed, wheat germ, soy, olive oil, or nuts, chances are that the mystery fat is a blend of these two



Separate fat from fiction.

"good" fats, which can help manage cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and mood, as well as help reduce the risk of a heart attack. And if you see such items as flaxseed, walnuts, pumpkin seeds, fish, fish oil, or cod-liver oil, you earn bonus points—the fat source is likely to be rich in omega-3 fatty acids, essential fats that your body is unable to produce on its own, but requires for brain function and inflammation fighting. Many of us don't get enough omega-3s. Eat the food immediately.

Another possible answer: 4 g trans fats

Is the food something that never came close to existing in nature? Say, a Twinkie? If you see the words "partially hydrogenated" in the ingredients, trans fats are lurking somewhere inside. The packaging red alert is anything that says it's "creamy" yet doesn't contain cream, which requires refrigeration. Basically, trans fats are like an ambulance—they'll lead you to a deadly accident or straight to the hospital.

—G.R.