10 SOURCES I TRUST

When you have a question I haven't answered, here are ten sources to consult. I'm confident they would tackle the topic with evidence-based reasoning and clear explanations.

1 **BERKELEY WELLNESS,** *berkeleywellness.com*

2 **CONSUMER REPORTS,** *consumerreports.org*

3 ***EATINGWELL* MAGAZINE,** *eatingwell.com*

4 **ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP,** *ewg.org*

5 **HARVARD T. H. CHAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH'S NUTRITION SOURCE,** *hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource*

6 **MAYO CLINIC,** *mayoclinic.org*

7 **THE *NEW YORK TIMES* WELL SECTION,** *nytimes.com/well*

8 **OLDWAYS WHOLE GRAINS COUNCIL,** *wholegrainscouncil.org*

9 **WEBMD,** *webmd.com*

10 **WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE,** *wri.org*

How to Read a Food Label

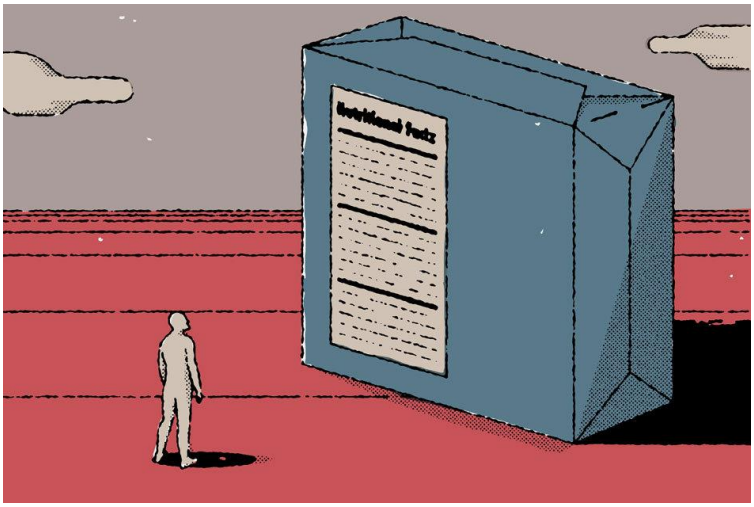
By Sophie Egan
Illustrations by Michael George Haddad

https://www.nytimes.com/guides/well/how-to-read-a-food-label

Food labels can seem perplexing, and people often read them with an eye toward different things. Whether you are looking to limit your sugar, cut calories or increase your fiber intake, this guide will help you make sense of the numbers, ingredients and nutritional information packed onto that tiny box. Read on for the information you need to get through the supermarket with ease.

What's on the Back

Understanding the nutrition information and ingredients list can help you make healthier choices.



What to Look For

Pull a container of food from the supermarket shelf, or grab the nearest box from your cupboard, pantry or desk. Flip it over or on its side. Welcome to the Nutrition Facts panel. Good news: You've now taken Step 1 of this guide, which is to make a habit of this little gymnastics routine.

If you look at nothing else on the package, look at the Nutrition Facts panel. Knowing how to read the Nutrition Facts panel comes down to quantity and quality. "How much?" and "Of what?"

What's Listed?

- **Serving Size**: The amount of the product typically consumed at once.
- **Calories**: The number of calories, or energy, provided by a single serving. 2,000 calories is the average daily reference amount, based on the caloric intake recommended for many

average Americans. (Though the exact amount per person is based on factors like age, activity level, height, weight and other health goals.)
- **Percent Daily Value**. The Daily Value is how much of a given nutrient you should either aim to reach (for example, dietary fiber) or keep below (like sodium). Knowing how much of that amount is in a given food can help you keep track.
- **Nutrients**: Fats, carbohydrates, protein and cholesterol, as well as select vitamins and minerals.

Targets to Keep in Mind

If you're only going to read one section of this guide, this is the one to focus on. The following reference points are good context to keep in mind when you first look at a food label, otherwise it can be difficult to know whether a given food offers a lot or a little of something you're trying to dial up or dial down.

The average American adult is encouraged to aim for the following numbers for daily consumption.

Information to pay the most attention to:

- **Calories: likely, you should be aiming to eat around ~2,000 a day.**
- **Saturated fat:** less than **20 grams.** Rather than merely trying to keep this number as low as possible, what's most important is what you replace it with: Aim for healthy (unsaturated) fats, whole grains, fruits and vegetables.
- **Trans fat: 0 grams.** Trans fat is no longer "generally recognized as safe" by the F.D.A. June 18, 2018, was the deadline for manufacturers to eliminate artificial sources of trans fat from all new food products sold in the United States. (The World Health Organization called for the same worldwide by 2023.) Products created before June 18 of this year have until January 1, 2020 to comply.
- **Sodium:** While the Daily Value is **2,300 mg**, the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the Center for Science in the Public Interest and others urge the government recommendation to be lowered to **1,500 mg**. This is about 2/3 teaspoon of salt. Over 70 percent of our sodium intake comes from food eaten away from home (processed or prepared foods from the grocery store, or food from restaurants), so along with added sugar, this is one of the most important things to check on the Nutrition Facts panel.
- **Added sugar:** While the Daily Value is **50 grams**, the American Heart Association recommends keeping it to **25-36 grams** per day:
    - Men: 9 teaspoons = 36 grams = 150 calories
    - Women: 6 teaspoons = 25 grams = 100 calories

But the average American consumes more than 82 grams per day, according to the University of California, San Francisco.

- **Dietary fiber: 28 grams.** This has been deemed a "nutrient of public health concern" because of the health risks associated with low intake and the fact that the vast majority of Americans don't get enough. Fiber is important for overall digestive health, so inadequate intake can lead to constipation and other bowel problems; it may also make you not feel as full, which can lead to excess calorie intake and potential weight gain.

Other information:

- **Total fat:** The Food and Drug Administration continues to include this on the panel despite consensus from the nutrition community that the type of fat is far more important; in fact, in 2015, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee recommended removing the upper limit for total fat, which was important because it had led to widespread substitution with refined carbohydrates and sugars that had a net negative effect on diet quality. Skip total fat on the label and focus on minimizing saturated fat (as low as you can go) and trans fat (avoid altogether).
- **Protein:** Almost no one in the United States fails to get enough protein, so with a few exceptions such as elite athletes, most people will automatically get enough protein in a given day by eating a variety of foods.
- **Cholesterol:** While blood cholesterol is an important health consideration, the amount you get from food (dietary cholesterol) is no longer considered as concerning for most people as it once was.
- **Carbohydrates:** Not all carbohydrates are created equal. You can't tell from the Nutrition Facts panel how many whole grains servings are in a product, so your best bet is to check the ingredients list for first ingredient being a whole grain, such as quinoa, whole grain oats, brown rice, whole-wheat flour, etc. The additional carbohydrate-related information you might glean from the panel is basically added sugar (aim low) and dietary fiber (aim high).

Why Is the Nutrition Facts Panel There?

Food package regulations related to health and content claims were put in place in 1992. "Before that, there was an explosion of package claims that frequently confused and often misled consumers," said Jerold Mande, professor of the practice at the Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, and a former senior advisor to the commissioner of the United States Food and Drug Administration. He led the design of the original Nutrition Facts panel. Congress passed the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act that gave the F.D.A. the mandate "to design a label and require that virtually every package of food have a label on it," he said. At the time, the law required new information and that it be standardized.

In May 2016, the F.D.A. announced that the Nutrition Facts panel would be updated to reflect the latest nutrition science and to better equip consumers to make informed food choices. It's already on thousands of products, and it will be on all packaged foods by Jan. 1, 2021 at the latest. (The original deadline for manufacturers who sell more than $10 million worth of food products per year was July 26, 2018, while those with earnings under that threshold had another year, but the F.D.A. announced an 18-month extension in May for both categories.)

What's New

When the Nutrition Facts panel was first published in the '90s, fat was the biggest nutritional culprit of poor health, and cardiovascular disease was the greatest health concern. Today, overweight and obesity, and their associated health issues, are the biggest concerns. The newest label draws your eye more to total calories and serving size information, as well as a new feature helping consumers limit added sugar, which used to be difficult to discern from total sugar.

Other recent changes to the information include:

- Larger font size for calories, servings per container and serving size.
- Bolding the number of calories and serving size.
- Updating what a serving size is to reflect how people actually eat, rather than the aspirational (recommended) serving size. Normal serving sizes have increased substantially compared with when the panel was first published in 1994. Ice cream is one of the most commonly misrepresented products: A standard serving had been ½ a cup, yet few among us break out the measuring cup or exercise that level of self-control. Now, 2/3 cup is considered the more realistic reference amount. And if you're drinking a 20-ounce bottle of soda, you may actually be downing 65 grams of sugar (well above the amount recommended for an entire day), not the 26 grams that might have been noted for one 8-ounce "serving,"
- Providing "dual column" labels, which offer the nutrition profile for both a serving and a package, when a product is large enough that it could either be consumed all at once or over multiple sittings. If a bag of chips is the size often sold at a deli to accompany a sandwich (3 ounces), how many of us considers that bag three servings? The new label reveals that the whole bag might contain 420 calories, in addition to noting 140 calories per "serving."

Until all manufacturers are in compliance with the updated label, a close look at the serving size and some quick multiplication may be on hand before finishing off the whole bag. (My personal pet peeve is when manufacturers list a serving in ounces. As if I carry around a scale!)

Noteworthy changes to vitamins/minerals:

- Vitamin D and potassium are now listed. Surveys conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have found that many Americans don't get enough of these micronutrients.
- Vitamins A and C are no longer required to be listed. Although deficiencies of both were found in American diets in the early 1990s, the F.D.A. has determined that those are now rare.
- Calcium and iron continue to be listed.

Other changes:

- Added sugars are now listed as separate from total sugars. The distinction aligns with the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which supported limiting added sugar to no more than 10 percent of total daily calories in order to reach other nutritional needs and stay within recommended daily calorie limits.
- Removing calories from fat. More recent studies have shown that it's the type of fat (trans fat and saturated fat vs. monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats) that matters more than the number of grams ingested.
- Changing the footnote to better explain what Percent Daily Value means.
- Revising Daily Values for sodium, dietary fiber and vitamin D.

Ingredients List

The ingredients list is the second most important component of a food package. This should be your next stop after you check the Nutrition Facts panel. In fact, a recent survey by the International Food Information Council Foundation found that over half of consumers consult the ingredients list or Nutrition Facts panel often or always before making a food purchasing decision. It's a good idea to cross-reference the two to see how they align.

Things to keep in mind:

- Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight.
- The list doesn't give percentages or relative weights for each ingredient, so it can be difficult to know how much of a jump there is between the first and second ingredients, and again for subsequent ingredients.
- The list must be complete.

As a general rule, the first ingredient is the most important in the list. (Ideally, the first ingredient is a healthful whole food such as a type of nut, legume, fruit, vegetable or whole grain.) That said, scanning the first three ingredients can provide a good overall sense of a product's nutritional profile.

(A word about sugar: In the cast of food ingredients that make up processed foods, sugar is a character by many names, from maltose to molasses, agave nectar to corn syrup. Often small amounts of several different types of sugar are listed to avoid one large amount altogether landing in the beginning of the list. Check out this handy list of 61 synonyms for sugar.)

Another general rule is that you should look for “clean labels” with fewer, simpler and more intuitive sounding ingredients. That said, just because a product has a short list of simple ingredients doesn’t mean it’s good for you. The list for stick butter might be just one, familiar ingredient (e.g., “sweet cream”), but that doesn’t make it healthy.

On the other hand, not all chemicals or additives are inherently bad for health. As Laura MacCleery, policy director for the C.S.P.I., said: “Everything is chemicals; we’re not chemical-phobes, but the F.D.A. doesn’t do a particularly good job of regulating those that aren’t good for you. So the fact that companies are able to put into the marketplace ingredients they don’t know the safety of creates legitimate lack of consumer confidence.” (This happens because in the United States it’s not required that ingredients be tested for safety by the government before they can be put in food.) For those words that aren’t as familiar, C.S.P.I. offers “Chemical Cuisine,” a resource of all the major food additives and their safety ratings.

Related Guide

How to Stop Eating Sugar

This guide will walk you through how you can make smart food choices to reduce sugar consumption, and how you can keep your life sweet, even without so many sweets.

Read More About Nutrition Labeling

F.D.A. Finishes Food Labels for How We Eat Now

May 20, 2016

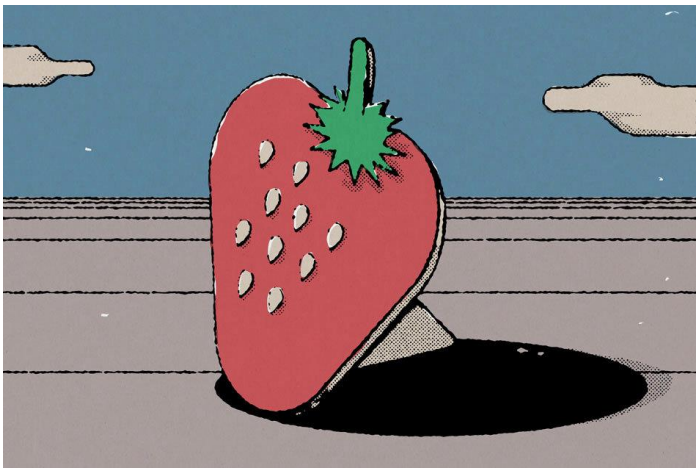
The Worst Fat in the Food Supply
May 22, 2017

F.D.A. Sets 2018 Deadline to Rid Foods of Trans Fats
June 16, 2015

Trans Fats Should be Eliminated Worldwide by 2023, W.H.O. Says
May 14, 2018

What's on the Front

More than telling you what's in the food, labels on the front are mostly aimed at getting you to buy the product.



What's There

Take a package off the shelf and on its face you're likely to see:

- The brand of the product, telling you what company produced it.
- A name for the product — what *is* the thing you're holding, exactly? Chips, crisps, granola bar, salad dressing, juice, or maybe that new catchall, "clusters"?
- Descriptions of ingredients, flavors or other attributes the manufacturer has decided to emphasize.
- Images that help reinforce the description: for instance, an image of a fresh onion for sour cream and onion flavored chips, or an image of a farm surrounded by wheat fields for a cereal containing organic wheat.
- Amount of food in the container (usually shown in ounces and grams).
- A "sell by," "use by" or "best if used by" date. Note that the vast majority of food date labels are markers of quality — manufacturers' suggestions of peak freshness and taste, rather than indicators of food safety or health concerns. To avoid unnecessary food waste, read on.

You might also see: Health claims of various stripes, third-party certification labels and some nutrition information that's similar, though not identical, to what's on the Nutrition Facts Panel.

Facts Up Front

In 2011, the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the Food Marketing Institute set up a voluntary program called Nutrition Keys, a horizontal nutrient snapshot that has been described as a set of piano keys, a row of teeth or a shield.

Now called Facts Up Front, what's displayed is "an industry-created version of the Nutrition Facts Panel that only gives you the good news," said Ms. MacCleery. "The Nutrition Facts panel is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Having been in wide use ever since, there are no current plans to roll out a federally regulated front-of-pack nutrition labeling scheme. So, on the whole it's best to **bring a skeptical eye to this part of the package.**

Beware 'Health Halos'

Psychology research has found that we tend to behave in bizarre ways in response to the absence of certain ingredients perceived as bad. It's a phenomenon known as "health halos." Seeing labels

like “low-fat” and “gluten-free” will lead most of us to consume more of the product than we would have of the original version, because in our minds they are healthier and lower in calories. In reality, those products are typically about the same calorically and the same or worse nutritionally (depending on the replacement ingredients).

Health halos apply to other elements, like the imagery on a package. “There are a lot of attempts in the food marketplace to make foods that aren’t great for you seem healthier, because they know that consumers are drawn to less healthy foods,” said Ms. MacCleery. “We all are. And what we need to do is find ways to give ourselves mental permission to consume, say potato chips. So they’ll put stamps and claims and pictures of vegetables all over say, veggie sticks, and then what’s inside is potato chips with a little dusting of spinach. And we might even eat more of those than a bag of potato chips because we think we’re doing something that’s good for our bodies. They use our mental landscape against us.”

Although product images aren’t supposed to be misleading, they often are, according to Ms. MacCleery. An emphasized ingredient or flavor might not be listed as high in the ingredients list as you’d expect, or it might not be represented in the way you’d think. Take, for example, strawberry-flavored toaster pastries. There could be a photo of strawberries on the front, so you might think you’re getting a premium ingredient or including more variety in your diet, but in the list, no strawberries to be found: instead, you might find pureed apple with red 40 dye and artificial strawberry flavor.

Don't Get Distracted

A label might say “0 grams trans fat” on the front but be quite high in saturated fat. Or a label might say “No added sugar” on the front but be quite high in sodium. You might not realize either of these without turning over the product to check the Nutrition Facts panel.

Under the Facts Up Front system from the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the Food Marketing Institute, you may notice that the numbers are large and the percent Daily Value is quite small. This is “a big disinformation act to confuse you about what’s important to read,” said Mr. Mande. When designing the original Nutrition Facts panel, Mr. Mande and his colleagues at the F.D.A. conducted research at malls in which social scientists gave consumers various tests about labels. While consumers reported hating percentages, they actually performed by far the best with them compared to other reference points like raw numbers. (Plus, as a shorthand, you can consider something “low” if it provides 5 percent or less of a Daily Value, and “high” if it provides above 20 percent; everything else is in between.) So why is a percentage more effective? It puts everything on a single scale.

Health claims authorized by the F.D.A. do exist (for example, “Diets low in sodium may reduce the risk of high blood pressure, a disease associated with many factors.”), but it’s a tall order to memorize which associations are evidence-based. You’re better off checking the Nutrition Facts panel to know what you’re eating. (If you’re curious, though, the full list can be found online.)

Words Worth a Look

In addition to requiring use of the Nutrition Facts label, ingredients list and various other elements like the product’s standard name and net contents, the F.D.A. also regulates certain words and claims. But even those that do have standardized definitions behind them might not mean what you’d expect.

Here are three examples of claims that are generally misleading and not worth paying attention to:

- **“Reduced ___”:** (such as sodium or fat): This means the product has at least 25 percent less of that ingredient or substance than the original product has. It does not mean it is objectively low in the item or low compared with the amount considered healthy to consume in a given day. Example: An original version of a soup might have 1160 milligrams of sodium, and the reduced sodium version might have 870 milligrams. While lower, that’s still a lot.
- **“Natural”:** For years, the F.D.A. did not issue a formal definition, but considered the word “natural” on a food label to mean that nothing artificial or synthetic was added to a product “that would not normally be expected to be in that food.” But 84 percent of consumers surveyed in 2015 by Consumer Reports thought the term “natural” on a food label should mean no artificial ingredients or colors or toxic pesticides were used, and 82 percent thought it should mean no genetically modified organisms were used. Still, interpretations vary wildly for what might be “expected” in a food. Following a robust outpouring of consumer response during an extended public comment period, the F.D.A. announced this spring that it’s getting close to a new official definition. And the term “natural flavors” is a catchall, the ingredients of which do not need to be specified. This can be particular problematic for consumers looking to avoid specific ingredients (such as animal-derived flavors) for religious reasons or if following a vegan diet, or for those with food allergies.
- **Structure/function claims:** These are the ones you see stating the role of a given substance in maintaining or enhancing a certain body function, such as “calcium builds strong bones.” Kathleen Zelman, a registered dietician and the director of nutrition for WebMD, has pointed out a chocolatey breakfast cereal that once lauded its ability to “support your child’s immunity” because of the antioxidants and vitamins it contained — despite no evidence linking the specific product and immunity, and the fact that it was about 40 percent sugar by weight. Structure/function claims are not reviewed by the F.D.A., and she says it’s best to take them with a grain of salt.

Interpreting the Labels

If you have a specific health goal in mind, here are some tips for getting the most out of various labels.

Nutrient Density and Diet Quality

In general, we've seen a welcome shift away from the long history of evaluating the merits of a given food based on tallies of individual nutrients, toward a more holistic assessment of whole foods for the full set of benefits they may offer. Put another way, it's helpful to think about the overall nutritional profile of a given food or product: Will it do me harm? Will it do me good?

Try not to get too caught up in whether you're at 71 percent of this or that Daily Value, or how many grams of fiber you've logged by noon. When comparing one item to another (or one dish to another on a menu), maximize the quality of the foods you choose relative to their quantity: What do you gain for the calories you spend? And how does the mix of foods you eat add up in a given day or week?

Examples of this ethos in practice:

- Type of fat matters more than the amount of fat — healthy oils contain beneficial poly- and monounsaturated fat, for instance — so it's more important to avoid trans fats altogether and minimize saturated fats.
- The type of carbohydrate matters more than the amount. Chickpeas or black beans might list a fair number of total carbohydrates, but for a variety of reasons (e.g., dietary fiber, plant-based protein), they're high-quality choices. In general, minimally processed or whole fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains are the healthiest sources of carbs, whereas highly processed, refined-grain products like white bread and cookies, soft drinks and fries are carbs with a deservedly bad rap, since they don't take as long to digest (useful for maintaining a healthy weight and blood sugar levels) or offer the same nutritional quality.
- Calorie-free products aren't always a free pass. A zero-calorie soda, for example, might also provide zero nutrients, and come packed with artificial sweeteners, rendering it potentially negative for health or at best nutritionally empty.

Calorie Controversy

Much ink has been spilled on whether "a calorie is a calorie." In short, yes, on a cellular level, and no, on many other levels.

Dr. Walter Willett, a professor and the former chairman of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, notes in his book "Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy": "The amount of energy a particular food can deliver to mitochondria — the tiny engines that power your cells—is measured in calories." For most people eating a mix of foods, our bodies convert carbohydrates, fats and protein to energy at the same rate.

But calories are different, too: In general, calorie quality is more important than just the number in isolation, meaning where the calories come from, as that translates more or less into nutritional bang for your buck. Two hundred calories from an avocado, say (which offers healthy fats and other nutrients) can be a better choice than only eating 100 calories from, say, sliced deli meats (which are often high in saturated fat and sodium). Or if you eat 100 calories in the form of an apple, chances are you're going to feel pretty full for a while. Fiber helps slow the absorption of sugar, whereas if you consume 100 calories as soda, you'll probably notice no difference in how hungry you are.

All told, the quality of the calories and the number of calories you consume are interrelated. Both are important for maintaining a healthy weight and increasing your chances of other long-term health benefits. Online calculators can help you check your recommended daily calories.

Whole Grains

There are three main components of grains: the bran, germ and endosperm. Refined grains have removed the bran and germ—to have longer shelf life and be finer and lighter in terms of flour—whereas true whole grains keep these intact. They offer dietary fiber, healthy fats, protein and many vitamins and minerals.

Eating whole grains has been linked to a range of positive health outcomes. Shoot for *at least half* of your total grains consumed to be whole grains, according to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. (Each day, aim for **48 grams = three servings.)**

A good tool for checking whole-grain content on packages is the Oldways Whole Grains Council's stamp system.

- 100% Whole Grain: All of the grain in the product is exclusively whole-grain. A minimum of 16 grams per serving (considered one full serving of whole grains) is required.
- 50%+ Whole Grain: Of the grain in the product, at least half is whole-grain. Must offer at least a half-serving, or 8 grams, per serving of the product.
- Whole Grain (the basic stamp): This means a product provides a "significant" amount of whole grain (8 grams minimum), but less than half of all the grain is whole-grain.

Avoid Cross-Contamination if You Have Food Allergies

For those with food allergies, small amounts of trace ingredients can cause serious symptoms or even be life-threatening.

- **Know what to look for:** The top eight most common food allergens in the United States, which account for 90 percent of food allergies, are: eggs, milk, wheat, soy, peanuts, tree nuts, fish and Crustacean shellfish.
- **Know where to look:** If a product contains any of the top eight, the F.D.A. requires that manufacturers disclose that information through one of two ways. If you or someone in your care has a food allergy, check both the ingredients list — which might include, for instance, "whey (milk)," so someone with a milk allergy would be aware — and the note beneath or beside the ingredients list, which might say, for instance "Contains: milk."
- **Remember this disclosure system only applies to food products regulated by the F.D.A.** Products regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which includes meat, poultry and certain egg products, are not required to include allergen labeling. Some manufacturers may list advisories such as a product being processed in a facility where a given allergen can be found, but these measures are voluntary, so for those foods, you can't rely on the labels alone to ensure that a food product is safe for consumption for a food-allergic individual.

Up Your Supermarket Savvy

A few general tips to remember as you navigate food labels to align with your health goals:

Whenever something gets removed from a processed food product — say, fat — it needs to be replaced with something that serves a similar function (desired texture, shelf life, flavor, color, etc.). “It’s physics,” Mr. Mande said. “There’s still food there.”

- Sometimes the thing being subbed in may have worse effects on health than the original offender.
- Gluten-free is a more recent example with similar consequences: Once the gluten is removed, it usually needs to be replaced with something. And the junk fillers for gluten are usually flour replacements such as tapioca starch, potato starch or rice starch. They’re also refined carbs, which give the bloodstream a jolt of sugar. Just as a fat-free SnackWell’s cookie in 1992 was still a cookie, today a gluten-free toaster pastry is still a toaster pastry.

Focus on healthy dietary patterns overall, such as the well-studied Mediterranean Diet — mostly fruits, vegetables, olive oil, nuts, seeds, legumes and whole grains—rather than focusing on specific nutrients. For example, if your diet is already high in saturated fat, maybe you’re best off with a daily habit of 1% milk, but if your all-around eating pattern emphasizes healthy, minimally processed, mostly plant-based foods, you’re probably fine opting for 2%.

Fortifying processed foods does not make them healthy. In a practice the food studies author Warren Belasco calls “nutrification,” manufacturers of food products may first remove a healthful component found naturally in an ingredient (say, the germ and bran from wheat kernels), then add back in nutrients that would have been in the whole food to start with, slap a label on the box of the processed product touting these attributes, and charge slightly more. Enriched grains are a classic example of this. A better bet is to buy the item that hasn’t had its best nutritional attributes removed through excessive processing in the first place.

Taking It Further

Reading labels can help you to be a conscious eater in other ways, too.

Knowing how to read food labels means expanding the conversation in your head from how your purchases will affect yourself and your family to consider the environment and the people and animals who make your food possible. Here we ask, Will it do others harm? Will it do others good?

There are dozens of certifications on the market, but the handful selected below are among the most meaningful. So depending on your budget and the things you care most about supporting, these ones may be worth the extra grocery dollars.

Certifications

1. "**Organic."** "When we look at labels in the third-party verification realm, the U.S.D.A. organic seal is one we point consumers to as one they can trust," said Charlotte Vallaeys, a food labels expert at Consumer Reports. "It has meaningful and strong standards backing the label, and those standards are very comprehensive." The standards prohibit a range of practices and substances, from most synthetic pesticides and growth hormones to sewage sludge, as well as the routine use of antibiotics (more on this below). In short, these standards can support ecosystems and farmworkers because the farming practices are less intensive than conventional methods. That said, the label does not mean the product itself is nutritious (organic chocolate frosting is still chocolate frosting), nor does it ensure rigorous animal welfare standards, so if animal welfare is important to you, organic is not the one to focus on.

2. "**Animal Welfare Approved."** This is the top-rated animal welfare certification on the market, according to Ms. Vallaeys, who said Animal Welfare Approved means animals were raised on family farms and free to "engage in their natural behaviors." It's one of the few times when reality actually aligns with the image most consumers have in their minds of what humane animal husbandry ought to look like: living outside, on pasture, scratching and pecking for bugs. (That's really what chickens want to be doing, she said, noting, "I feel like I've become a chicken psychologist.") Though this label, which is certified by a non-profit organization called A Greener World, isn't that widely used, several other labels, such as **"Certified Humane,"** compose a close second tier. Learn more at Consumer Reports' great resource: greenerchoices.org.

3. **No Antibiotics Used.** Though less broad a label than organic, any indication of lower use of antibiotics on meat, poultry and other animal products is generally better, according to Ms. MacCleery. Reducing antibiotic use in the food supply is a critical public health issue in order to avoid antibiotic resistance and maintain the effectiveness of those that are important for human medicine. "They might save your life one day," she said.

4. "Fair Trade International," "Fair for Life" and **"Fair Trade Certified."** Generally speaking, according to Ms. Vallaeys all three of these labels ensure good, safe working conditions on farms; prevent discrimination and harassment; strictly prohibit forced labor and child labor; and involve rigorous inspections to verify compliance. These programs tend to require that a certain price be paid when products are purchased directly from farmers, and most commonly for commodities like coffee, the price premium is often fed into a fund for local projects. All three ensure that workers are paid minimum wage, but their timelines and policies vary for getting pay up to the point of a *livable* wage. On that mark, Fair for Life has the strongest standard, she said.

5. **"Bird-Friendly."** Certified by the Smithsonian, this label is considered one of the most rigorous for habitat conservation. Just as **Demeter certified "Biodynamic"** does for products like wine, Bird-Friendly takes the organic standards as a baseline but goes several steps further, and for coffee specifically. In tropical locations where coffee is grown, forests typically get cut down, destroying wildlife habitat in the process. Smithsonian's Bird-Friendly label signals that the homes of migratory birds are respected, that insect biodiversity is maintained, and that coffee is grown in shade (the canopies of which can sequester carbon and help mitigate climate change).

6. **“American Grassfed.”** If you see this label, which is a program of the American Grassfed Association, on beef, it means the cow really ate only grass or forage (or hay in winter, which is a dried grass). For a variety of reasons, ruminant animals are not meant to eat grain, and although all beef cattle are fed some grass at some point in their lives, Ms. Vallaeys considers American Grassfed the most meaningful signifier of a healthful diet for cattle, goats, sheep and bison, which in turn has benefits for human and environmental health. Beyond meat, though, don’t forget the diets of dairy cows, too: For milk and dairy products, look for “**PCO 100% GrassFed**,” she said, which is run by the Pennsylvania Certified Organic organization

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About the Author

Sophie Egan is a San Francisco-based writer whose work on food and health has appeared in The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, Time, Bon Appétit, WIRED, EatingWell and other publications. Her forthcoming book — a radically practical guide to food choices that are good for you, the planet, and others — will be published by Workman in spring 2020.

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