

## The Secret to Reading Food Labels

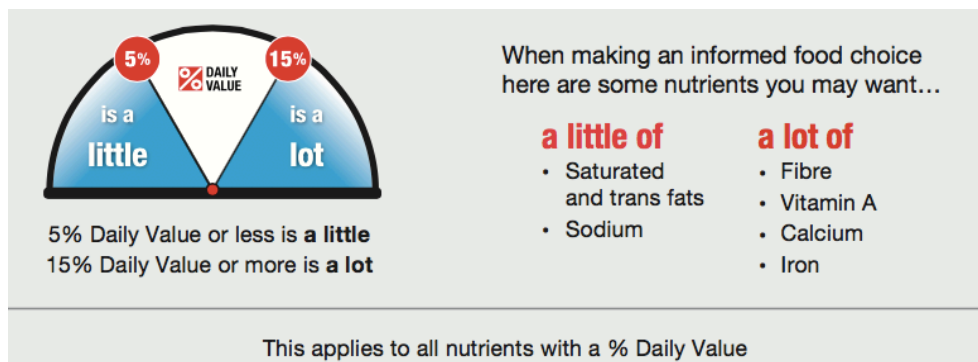
Making healthy choices at the grocery store has become challenging with ever-increasing options. The tips and tricks presented in this article will empower you to become 'A Smart Shopper.' You will learn how to unveil the secret on the food packaging and make nutritious food choices.

In Canada, all prepackaged foods display the following information on the packaging:

### 1. Nutrition Facts Table:

This table provides details like serving size, calories, and percentage Daily Value (DV%) of thirteen core nutrients and some optional micronutrients. A nutrition facts table can also be used to:

- learn about a food's nutritional value (calories and nutrients)
- see if a food contains a little (5% DV or less) or a lot (15% DV or more) of a nutrient
- compare two products to make informed food choices
- better manage special food needs such as a low-sodium diet



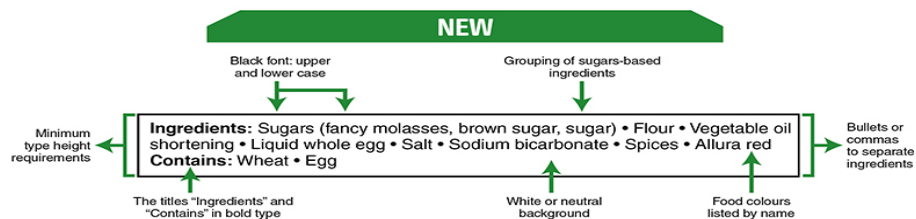
**Figure 1: Daily Value, Source: Health Canada**

To learn more about the individual nutrients listed on the Table visit: [Interactive nutrition facts table](#)

As per Health Canada regulations, all packaged foods with two or more ingredients, manufactured in or imported to Canada must have a nutrition label in English and must comply with the regulated guidelines. If you come across a label in a foreign language, be critical of its accuracy.

## 2. Ingredient List

The ingredient list states what the food item contains in descending order by weight. The first ingredient is present in the largest amount and the last ingredient is the least. It is a good idea to check the list to find out if the product contains a specific ingredient that you may be allergic or sensitive to. If you are in a rush, quickly scanning the ingredient list can help you decide if the food meets your needs.



**Figure 2 List of Ingredients; Source: Health Canada**

### Quick Tips:

- The shorter the list, the better the product may be. A long list of ingredients suggests the food is highly processed.
- If the names of some of the ingredients seem mysterious to you, then simply bypass the item.
- If sugar, fat, or sodium are the first three ingredients, then be cautious – the product may not be the healthiest choice.
- Limit foods/snacks with saturated fats and hydrogenated fats like butter, ghee, clarified butter, lard, coconut oil, palm oil, palm kernel oil, and/or shortenings. Choose non-hydrogenated margarine or fats.
- Look for whole grains, which is not the same as enriched, fortified, or unbleached.
- Sugars can be naturally present in foods and can be added as well. Verify the sugar content by checking on both the ingredient list and the nutrition facts table. Both naturally occurring and added sugars contribute calories. Be mindful of how much sugars you consume.

### Optional Nutrition Claims

Inclusion of nutrition claims, which includes nutrient and health claims, are regulated by Health Canada. This means that no food manufacturer or importer in Canada can print false nutrition claims. There are clear rules that the food manufacturers must follow before publishing or advertising any nutrition claim about any of their food products.

Nutrient claims mention the amount of a specific nutrient the food contains. These claims help you choose the food containing more or less of only one ingredient. For example, bread with four grams of fibre per slice can claim to be 'High in Fibre.' You will still have to read the nutrition facts to ensure the food meets all the criteria that meet your nutrition goals.



Health claims highlight how the food may affect your health or play a role in a particular health condition. For example, to make a health claim about sodium and reduced risk of high blood pressure, the food must be low in (or free of) sodium.

To learn more about Nutrition Claims visit: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/understanding-food-labels/nutrition-claims.html>

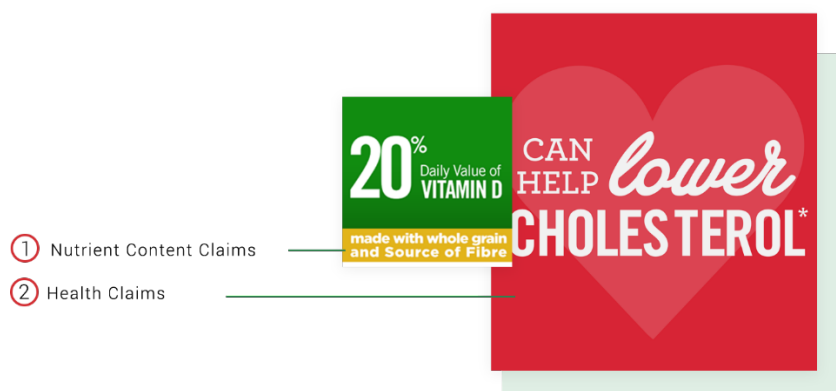


Figure 3: <https://www.myheartmatters.ca/cart2table/>

### 13 Rules to Decipher the Nutrition Label Secret:

Food is fuel; the more you burn the more you need! The less you burn the less you need!  
Quality of fuel matters too! A high-grade fuel will burn more efficiently.

Sugars, saturated fats (SF), and simple carbohydrates are a less efficient fuel for your body!

1. Never judge a food by its packaging! Most nutritional claims by manufacturers are meaningless and deceiving. Trust only the facts.
2. Check the serving size – Portion out the serving you plan to eat in a day and then continue reading the label
3. Use % DV as your guide for identifying which foods are high or low in a nutrient – 5% DV means that there is less of a nutrient and 15% DV means that there is more of it. We need less fats, sodium, and sugars, and need more of fibre, vitamins, and minerals.
4. Calories listed are per serving. Be mindful of how many servings you will be consuming as this will affect the total number of calories. For example, if you are eating two serving sizes, then you will get twice the calories of what is listed.
5. If you are looking for a snack, choose smaller, 100 calorie packs to help with portion control.
6. Identify where the calories are coming from – fats, carbohydrates, or proteins.
7. Check the fat content of the food. High fat foods contain a lot of calories.
8. There are more than three types of fats listed on the label - Look for higher monounsaturated fat and omega-3 fat content.
9. Choose foods lower in 'saturated fats' (preferably less than 8% DV), with 0–1-grams of trans fat per serving)



10. A food could be zero cholesterol and be high in saturated fat. Look at the label carefully!  
**Did you know:** Cholesterol is found only in animal products? A claim on a bottle of corn oil that it is “cholesterol-free” does not mean it can be used freely. All oils contain the same fat calories per serving. Many high fat foods and snacks can be ‘0 cholesterol’ yet be high in fat.
11. Processed foods contain salt or sodium. Baking soda, baking powder also contain sodium.  
Choose foods low sodium foods (< 140 milligrams of sodium per serving)
12. When it comes to fibre, looks can be deceiving! A food may appear to be loaded with fibre but only the label can reveal the truth! Manufacturers may add molasses or color to give the foods a fibre-rich look. Choose foods with at least four grams of fibre per serving.  
**Did you know:** whole wheat flour has very little fibre as most of the wheat germ is removed? Most whole grains are high in fibre and other nutrients. Some whole grains may not contain any fibre at all for example pearl barley. Learn more about whole wheat and [whole grains](#) [insert link to CPH article- [Enjoy Grains the Whole Way!](#)]
13. Limit processed foods that contain excess added sugars. Cereals, snack bars, snacks, juices, and packaged fruits are some examples of high sugar foods. Make healthier choices by choosing those with less than 10 grams of sugar per serving.  
**Did you know:** A sugar-free food does not mean it is healthy or low in calories? Always read between the lines!

### Some changes coming your way with the Nutrition Labels

To help people make healthier choices, Health Canada has implemented some changes to the nutrition labels and ingredient lists. By December 14, 2022, all food manufacturers will be mandated to comply with the new rules. The image below highlights the key changes. To learn more please visit: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-labelling-changes.html>



ORIGINAL		NEW	
<b>Nutrition Facts</b> <b>Valeur nutritive</b> Per 250 mL / par 250 mL		<b>Nutrition Facts</b> <b>Valeur nutritive</b> Per 1 cup (250 mL) pour 1 tasse (250 mL)	
Amount Teneur	% Daily Value % valeur quotidienne	Amount Teneur	% Daily Value* % valeur quotidienne*
Calories / Calories 110		<b>Calories 110</b>	
Fat / Lipides 0 g	0 %	Fat / Lipides 0 g	0 %
Saturated / saturés 0 g + Trans / trans 0 g	0 %	Saturated / saturés 0 g + Trans / trans 0 g	0 %
Cholesterol / Cholestérol 0 mg		Carbohydrate / Glucides 26 g	
Sodium / Sodium 0 mg	0 %	Fibre / Fibres 0 g	0 %
Carbohydrate / Glucides 26 g	9 %	Sugars / Sucres 22 g	22 %
Fibre / Fibres 0 g	0 %	Protein / Protéines 2 g	
Sugars / Sucres 22 g		Cholesterol / Cholestérol 0 mg	
Protein / Protéines 2 g		Sodium 0 mg	0 %
Vitamin A / Vitamine A	0 %	Potassium 450 mg	10 %
Vitamin C / Vitamine C	120 %	Calcium 30 mg	2 %
Calcium / Calcium	2 %	Iron / Fer 0 mg	0 %
Iron / Fer	0 %	*5% or less is a little, 15% or more is a lot *5% ou moins c'est peu, 15% ou plus c'est beaucoup	

Figure 4 Nutrition Facts Table Changes; Source: Health Canada

## More Logos on Foods: What do they mean?

There are also many food compositions and quality claims on food packages, fresh produce, and beverages. Only after being approved by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency can these logos be printed on the foods. Some common ones are gluten-free, wheat-free, non-GMO, peanut free, certified organic and to learn more please visit: <https://inspection.canada.ca/food-label-requirements/labelling/industry/composition-and-quality-claims/eng/1391025998183/1391026062752>



Figure 5 Food composition and Quality claims on packaged foods

## References:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/food-nutrition.html>

