

Nutrition Facts

Per 3/4 cup (29 g)

Cereal Plus 125 mL
Only 2% P.S. Milk

Amount

110

170

Calories

% Daily Value

6%

9%

Fat 1 g*

Saturated 0.3 g
+ Trans 0 g

Cholesterol 0 mg

Sodium 180 mg

Carbohydrate 23 g

Fibre 2 g

Sugars 10 g

Protein 2 g

Vitamin A

Vitamin C

Calcium

Iron

Vitamin D

0%

0%

10%

30%

0%

2%

0%

Chapter 9

Learn to Read Labels

How many of us actually pay attention to labels when shopping for groceries and other food items? Typically, we scan the brand, price and if we have an extra second, we glance at the expiry date. The nutrition sticker, however, usually goes unnoticed. And even if people try, the jargon sounds confusing and most people find it difficult to spot the red flags amongst the maze of details mentioned there.

Why Become 'Label Wise'?

Labels help us compare products more easily, choose better foods according to their nutritional value and are particularly helpful when one has to follow a special diet like, say, have low sodium foods (to prevent hypertension) or have a high fibre diet (to prevent constipation). Even if there is no special need, reading labels is an excellent habit that adds tremendously to a healthy lifestyle and helps people stick to healthier eating.

Look Out For

All those names and numbers mean something:

Serving Size: Always check this first. This will tell you the amount to eat - and if you stick to that amount, the amount of calories and other nutrients that you will ingest. For example, if the serving size mentioned is say, two biscuits but you have four, you will need to double the counts of everything right away.

Calories: We all need to monitor our intake; the amount that we ingest in a day should be lower than the amount we burn off. Usually for a sedentary worker it is around 1660 calories for a woman, and around 2110 calories for a man. So, make your calculations accordingly. For example, if one serving of the ready-to-eat food that you are eyeing is giving you upwards of 1000 calories, maybe you need to rethink - as managing the rest of the day's meals in the leftover calories from your quota will not be practical.

To do a quick check, follow this general guideline: Per Serving of food items providing of 150 calories or less would be low-calorie, between 150-400 would be medium and anything beyond would definitely be high calorie.

Fats: Here, first of all you need to look up the Total Fats. It is best to keep this as low as possible (we all know how bad fats are for our body in excess).

Also understand here that 1 gram of fat has 9 calories. So, if your food has 10 grams of fat, it contains 90 calories from fat. It is best to keep calories from fat less than 25% of the total calories in a day. And then it helps to read the finer print. Look up the saturated fats (SF) and opt for foods that keep these low. According to general guidelines, it is best to keep SF less than 1/3rd of the total fat intake in a day - that is about 8% of total calories. Polyunsaturated

and monounsaturated fats are the good fats but most labels don't mention these. Be careful with trans fats (the worst kind, so best to keep these nil).

If you see the any mention of the words "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" or "shortening," then the food contains some amount of trans fat... whether the label mentions it or not. Cholesterol is not as terrible as trans fats but it helps to keep this low as well, as excess may clog the arteries. High cholesterol foods include beef, eggs (the yolk), cheese, poultry, organ meats, cream and foods made from these.

Sodium: This refers to salt and our daily intake ideally should not be more than 2400 mg per day.

Total Carbohydrates: This reading usually includes carbohydrates, dietary fibre and sugars, so make sure to check the breakup given carefully. As long as the fibre content is high (say 3 gm or more per serving or 6g /100g) then the food has sufficient complex carbohydrates for it to be good for you. Very low fibre means refined, so it is better avoided.

Protein: The average protein requirement of protein is between 40 to 55 grams for most people. Higher protein foods are better for you, so check this number carefully too.

The Good Work!

Very effective regulations have been passed by FSSAI to ensure safe and fair labelling, and these are enforced very strictly. FSSAI has also been educating people about the labels for a long time now. One of the areas that FSSAI is working on extensively is educating India, rethinking Food Labelling to help make the consumer smart and learn how to eat safe and eat right.



Become a Label Wizard

Look out for these red flags



Chips

Red flags: They mention nil trans fats but check the ingredients list as often you'll find hydrogenated fat mentioned, which are trans fats really! Plus, their sodium content is universally high - and a cause of concern.

Packaged Juice

Red flags: Even if there is no added sugar, most juices have about 30 gm plus natural sugar in a 250 ml glass. Also, juices have close to nil fibre - less than 3 gm in a 250ml serve. Whereas just one fruit (say an apple) will give you the same amount of fibre with far less calories. Very low fibre is bad news for our gut.

Instant noodles/soups

Red flags: Fat content: While most soups tend to be low in fat, instant noodles are huge on them, often hiding more than 10 gm per serving.

Plus, instant soups tend to be really high on salt; even half of a packet at a time will give you more than half of your daily requirement of sodium right away!

Cookies and biscuits

Red flags: They tend to be very high in calories. If you stick to the serving size (2-3 biscuits) you will have down controlled calories (around 100 calories) but if you (like most of us) wolf down the 8-10 biscuits packet then it is upwards of 450 calories for most cookies (cream or even otherwise). That's about one fourth to one-fifth of the daily requirement of calories for most sedentary people. Think!

Plus, most of the cookies tend to be really high in sugar - often making up to about 1/3rd of the ingredients weight.

Ready-to-fry meats (kebabs, nuggets)

Red flags: A 100 gm serving (measly few nuggets) has about 8 gm fat, even before they have been fried - whereon the fat content just gets ballistic.

The kebabs or chicken nuggets you wolf down at one time could give you upwards of 1000 calories; that's staggeringly high for a snack.