

Understanding *food labels*

By Matt Brzycki



As a highly motivated wrestler, you probably choose your foods carefully. But if you purchase your own food in a supermarket or convenience store, do you examine the food label? And if so, do you really understand the information on it?

Based upon federal law, food labeling is required for most prepared foods. This includes breads, cereals, canned/frozen foods, snacks, desserts and beverages. Food labeling is not required for fruits, vegetables or fish. In addition, food labels that make health claims must comply with specific requirements. (For the upcoming discussions, it will be helpful for you to follow along with a food label in hand.)

THE NUTRITION FACTS PANEL

Located on the food label is an area referred to as the "nutrition facts panel." The panel must include information on total calories, calories from fat, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, dietary fiber, sugar, protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium and iron. Here is a closer look at the panel:

Servings

Near the top of the panel are the serving size and number of servings per container. In order for you to compare similar foods, serving sizes are standardized and use a "household measure term" (such as cups or tablespoons) along with a metric amount (such as grams or milliliters).

Calories

Also near the top of the panel are the calories and calories from fat. If you want to get an idea of the percentage of fat in a food, simply divide the fat calories by the total calories. For example, a food that has 160 calories of which 80 are from fat is 50% fat.

Keep in mind that the calories and calories from fat are per serving. This is a very important consideration with respect to weight management. Suppose that the

mentioned food has a serving size of one cup and there are four servings per container. If you consumed the entire contents, then, your actual intake was 640 calories of which 320 were from fat.

Total Fat

Directly below the information on calories is a section on nutrients. The top of this section provides details about total fat. A high intake of fat is associated with heart disease. Yeah, you are young now but it is never too early to take precautionary measures concerning your long-term health.

Noted under total fat is saturated fat (or "sat fat") and, as of January 2006, trans fat (or "trans fatty acids"). Saturated fat is found in foods from animal sources and a few plants. Foods that are high in saturated fat include fatty beef, veal, lamb, pork, lard, poultry fat, butter, cream, milk and cheese. Trans fat is formed when liquid oils are made more solid in a chemical process called "hydrogenation." Most trans fat is found in shortenings, stick margarine, cookies, crackers, snack foods, fried foods, doughnuts, pastries, baked goods and other processed foods made with or fried in partially hydrogenated oils.

No more than about 10% of your caloric intake should come from saturated fat and

trans fat combined. So if you consume 2,500 calories per day, the amount of saturated fat and trans fat should not exceed about 250 calories.

Cholesterol and Sodium

Also having a negative impact on health are cholesterol (which is linked to heart disease) and sodium (which is linked to high blood pressure). Your intake of cholesterol should be less than 300 milligrams per day; your intake of sodium should be less than 2,400 milligrams per day.

Total Carbohydrate

Appearing next on the panel is a section on carbohydrates. The main function of carbohydrates is to furnish you with energy, especially during intense activity. Foods that are high in carbohydrates include potatoes, cereals, pancakes, waffles, breads, bagels, spaghetti, macaroni, rice, grains, fruits and vegetables.

Noted under carbohydrates are dietary fiber and sugars. Consuming foods that are high in fiber promotes healthy bowel function. Natural sugars (such as those in fruit juice) are better than refined sugars (such as those in corn syrup).



Jordan Keckler (Modesto Junior College) tosses Travis McCrea (Chabot College) at the Modesto Invitational. Keckler is the #1 ranked wrestler at 141 lbs. Photo by John Sachs.

Protein

The panel also discloses information on protein. This macronutrient is necessary for the growth, maintenance and repair of biological tissues, particularly muscle tissue. Good sources of protein are beef, pork, fish, poultry, eggs, liver, dry beans and dairy products.

Vitamins and Minerals

Information on only four micronutrients is required on the panel: Vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium and iron. This is not to say that all other vitamins and minerals are unimportant; rather, these four micronutrients are not typically consumed in sufficient amounts and, thus, demand greater attention.

Percent Daily Values

An important term that is used on the panel is "Percent Daily Value" or "% Daily Value." It appears on the right-hand side of the panel and at the bottom of the panel as a footnote (provided that the label is large enough). Essentially, the Percent Daily Value is your allowable intake of a particular nutrient for the day.

The Percent Daily Values that are on the right-side portion of the panel are representative of a 2,000-calorie diet. If you consume less calories or more calories, you can still employ this information. For instance, you can determine at a glance if a serving of a food is low or high in a given nutrient. As a rule of thumb, a Daily Value that is 5% or less is low; a Daily Value that is 20% or more is high.

To see the usefulness of Percent Daily Values, consider a food that has 6.5 grams of fat. For a 2,000-calorie diet, the panel recommends an intake of 65 grams of fat per day. In this case, the Percent Daily Value is 10% which is considered low. But remember, this applies to one serving. If you ate two servings of this food, you would consume 13 grams of fat. Here, the Percent Daily Value is 20% which is considered high. Or look at it this way: You just consumed 20% of your daily allowance for fat (assuming a 2,000-calorie diet, of course). Does this mean that you should toss the food into someone else's shopping cart? No. It simply means that for the remainder of the day, you have to examine the fat content of foods a little more carefully and make better choices.

The Daily Values in the footnote are based upon intakes of 2,000 and 2,500 calories. If the full footnote is used, the information is the same for all products. It should be noted that total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium have upper limits meaning that this is the maximum amount that you should consume; carbohydrates and dietary fiber have lower limits meaning that this is the minimum

amount that you should consume.

For a 2,000-calorie diet, the panel recommends Daily Values for total fat and total carbohydrate of 65 grams and 300 grams, respectively. Since there are nine calories in a gram of fat and four calories in a gram of carbohydrate, some quick math reveals that this equates to 585 calories from fat and 1,200 calories from carbohydrate. With an intake of 2,000 calories, this means that the recommendations on the panel are for a caloric intake that is comprised of 29.25% fat, 60% carbohydrate and, by default, 10.75% protein. A better guideline for an athlete, however, is a caloric intake that is comprised of about 20% fat, 65% carbohydrate and 15% protein.

Percent Daily Values have not been established for trans fat and sugars. Also, a Percent Daily Value is not listed for protein unless a claim is made such as "high in protein."

Ingredients

If a food has more than one ingredient, they must be listed on the label. It must be understood that the ingredients are listed by weight from most to least.

HEALTH CLAIMS

Only certain terms can be used to make health claims on a food label. Furthermore, the terms must be used in particular ways. What follows are many of the terms that appear on food labels with respect to health claims and what those terms mean.

Free: No or a "physiologically inconsequential" amount of calories, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium and/or sugar. Acceptable synonyms for "free" are "without," "no" and "zero."

Calorie Free: Less than five calories per serving.

Fat Free: Less than one-half gram of fat per serving. An acceptable synonym for "fat-free milk" is "skim milk."

Sugar Free: Less than one-half gram of sugar per serving.

Low: Refers to foods that can be eaten frequently without exceeding dietary guidelines for calories, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and/or sodium. Acceptable synonyms for "low" are "little," "low source of," "contains a small amount of" and "few" (for calories).

Low Calorie: No more than 40 calories per serving.

Low Cholesterol: No more than 20 milligrams of cholesterol and no more than

two grams of saturated fat per serving.

Low Fat: No more than three grams of fat per serving.

Low Saturated Fat: No more than one gram of saturated fat per serving.

Low Sodium: No more than 140 milligrams of sodium per serving.

Very Low Sodium: No more than 35 milligrams of sodium per serving.

Lean: No more than 10 grams of fat, 4.5 grams of saturated fat and 95 milligrams of cholesterol per serving and per 100 grams.

Extra Lean: No more than five grams of fat, two grams of saturated fat and 95 milligrams of cholesterol per serving and per 100 grams.

Reduced/Less: At least 25% less of a particular nutrient or calories than the regular food. Acceptable synonyms for "reduced" and "less" are "lower" and "fewer" (for calories).

Light: If 50% or more of the calories are from fat, the fat must be at least 50% less than the regular food; if less than 50% of calories are from fat, the fat must be at least

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50% less or the calories at least 33% less than the regular food. An acceptable synonym for "light" is "lite."

Light in Sodium: At least 50% less sodium than the regular food.

More: At least 10% more of the Daily Value for a particular nutrient per serving than the regular food. The term can be used only to make claims about vitamins, minerals, protein, dietary fiber and potassium.

Good Source of: 10-19% of the Daily Value

#3 ranked Scott Sandy (Sacramento City College) works to takedown #6 Jeff Bridges (Shasta College) at the Sac City College Tournament. Photo by John Sachs.

for a particular nutrient per serving.

High: At least 20% of the Daily Value for a particular nutrient per serving. Acceptable synonyms for "high" are "rich in" or "excellent source of."

High Fiber: At least five grams of fiber per serving.

Healthy: No more than three grams of fat and one gram of saturated fat per serving along with limited amounts of cholesterol and sodium. Many foods must also contain at least 10% of the Daily Value for Vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium, iron, protein or fiber.

THE LAST REP

According to a recent poll, 60% of

Americans said that they frequently check food labels. Nevertheless, about 50% of Americans said that they buy foods that are bad for them even after they read the labels.

Clearly, simply reading the information on food labels is not enough. It is critical that you are also disciplined enough to make wise choices. And it all starts with understanding the information on food labels.

Matt Brzycki has authored, co-authored or edited 15 books on strength and fitness including *Wrestling Strength: The Competitive Edge*, *Wrestling Strength: Prepare to Win* and *Wrestling Strength: Dare to Excel*. These three wrestling books are available at all major bookstores or through Cardinal Publishers Group (800-296-0481).

