News from Pilates Health Connexion

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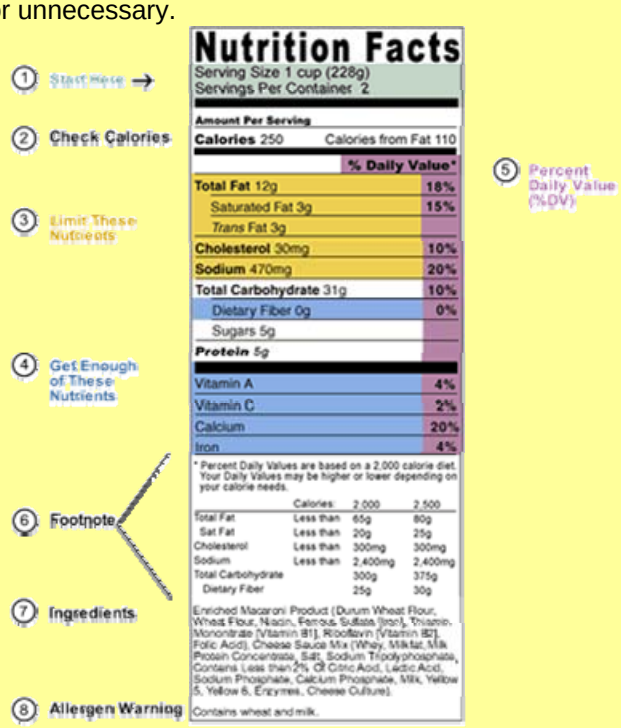
Dear Anna,

As a registered dietitian it is my job to make sense of the media news on nutrition and scientific research results and translate them into guidelines you can integrate into your daily life.
Once a month I will address a different topic which you can request.

Today I want to "make sense" of the food labels on packaged food.
How many of you read the labels and what information is helpful to you? Let me know by adding your comment to our FACEBOOK food label topic.

The food labels as we know them today were designed and passed by legislature 20 years ago in 1990. I think they can help tremendously in making healthy food choices. However I also think there is a lot of information that is confusing or unnecessary.



Let's start on the top. Most of us know to look at the serving size and the calories per serving. Unfortunately "serving size" is NOT the recommended amount or even a commonly consumed amount. It is rather arbitrary and we have to do the math depending on the consumed amount.

Calories from fat: this is NOT in addition to the total calories. It is the amount of calories coming from the fat in the product. As we know calories come from carbohydrates, protein and fat in the amount of 4 calories per gram from carbohydrates and protein and 9 calories for fat (and for the wine lovers in us 7 calories per gram alcohol). Since we eat a variety of food over the day, the amount of calories from fat varies widely by product and as such is not a good decision making indicator.

The next numbers for **fat, protein and carbohydrates** are based on an average 2000 calorie budget. Everybody's calorie budget is different, but knowing 2000 is an average helps. Your calorie need depends on age, gender, current weight and mainly activity level. They are expressed as a % of the daily value. This again is based on the recommendation to get about 60% of your total calories coming from carbohydrate calories, 30% from fat calories and 10% from protein calories. This does not add up to 100% since there are variations to this depending on individual life situations. Personally, none of those numbers help me much to make a food choice. Again, because I eat many different food during a day.

Cholesterol: this is a much researched topic and I will write a separate column on it. For now just remember if you do have a high blood cholesterol level keep the total amount of dietary cholesterol to about 300 mg.

Sodium: pay attention to this number if you COMPARE two of the same processed products and always take the one lower in sodium. For example canned soups, or canned beans.
Fiber: again look at this number when you compare two products for example breakfast cereal and take the one with the higher number.
Sugar: this number has a major flaw!! It does not tell you how much sugar is normally in the product and how much is added. For example a fruit yogurt has normally sugar from the fruit and the milk and then maybe added sugar. Look for my column on carbohydrates.

The most important part of the food label is the ingredient list!!
It lists all components of the product and therefore tells you best WHAT the product actually is. The longer this list the more processed the product usually is. If there are too many words you cannot pronounce you can be sure you get a lot of additives and preservatives. The first ingredient is the most in the product and the most important. If you are looking for a whole grain product the first ingredient should have the word WHOLE in it for example whole wheat flour, whole oats, or whole grain. Don't trust the front of the package as it is suppose to sell the product... read the ingredient list and yes I am sorry too that this is often the smallest print.

With that said eating a lot carrots at this point is not going to help :)

Do you have any other tips how to use the food labels or specific questions? I'd love it if you shared them. Leave a comment.

Looking forward to seeing you,
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