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NAVIGATING NUTRITION INFORMATION

Making Shopping Easier

by Mindy Hermann, MBA, RD



But only some of this information may matter to you at any one time. For example, if you're trying to lose weight, you may be keeping track of calories. If you have osteoporosis, calcium may be your top concern.

While you can search the Nutrition Facts panel for the nutrients that interest you, supermarket chains, food companies, and the government have also come up with some shortcuts to help shoppers quickly find the nutrients they want and avoid the nutrients they don't.

Nutrition guidelines on the shelf



Guiding Stars®

Nutritious choices made simple®

A trip to the supermarket can be overwhelming, particularly when you are trying to fill your cart with healthful foods. Food package labels are loaded with information, much of which pertains to nutrition. How can you sort through it all? The good news is that you don't need to. You can learn to use tools that make it easy to find just the information that is important to you, making your shopping trips less stressful and your food selections more healthful.

You may already be familiar with the Nutrition Facts panel every packaged food must display. The Nutrition Facts panel includes information on the calories, fats, carbohydrates, cholesterol, protein, and fiber, as well as certain vitamins and minerals in a serving of food. (See page 31 for an example.) Some of these, namely fiber, calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C, are nutrients that are good for health and can be difficult to get enough of. Others, such as calories, fat, saturated fat, sodium, and cholesterol, can be harmful if eaten in excess.

If you've noticed stars or new numbers on your grocery store shelf, your market may be offering one of two leading systems for rating foods based on their nutrition, Guiding Stars and NuVal.

Guiding Stars has rated more than 100,000 foods based on their ingredients and the information on their Nutrition Facts panels. Guiding Stars considers the amounts of healthful nutrients and ingredients, such as vitamins, minerals, dietary fiber, and whole grains, as well as less-desirable nutrients and ingredients, such as saturated fat, cholesterol, added sugars, and added sodium. Guiding Stars assigns positive or negative points to different nutrients and then tallies up the score for each food. For example, in the algorithm released on December 1, 2011, having 1 gram of saturated fat contributes a -1 to a food's overall score, but having 2.5 grams of dietary fiber contributes a +2. The food is then

Guiding Stars and NuVal are two leading systems for rating foods based on their nutrition.

SAMPLE HEALTH CLAIMS

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) permits certain health claims that pertain to the relationship between a particular food or nutrient and particular conditions or health risks. Widely accepted research does not show a consistent relationship between diet and arthritis, so you won't see health claims regarding arthritis on food packages. However, the following claims are permitted because they have been supported by extensive scientific evidence:

OSTEOPOROSIS

- Adequate calcium throughout life, as part of a well-balanced diet, may reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

CANCER

- A diet low in total fat may reduce the risk of some cancers.
- Low-fat diets rich in fiber-containing grain products, fruits, and vegetables may reduce the risk of some types of cancer.
- Low-fat diets rich in fruits and vegetables may reduce the risk of some types of cancer.

HEART DISEASE AND RELATED DISEASES

- Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease.
- Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol and rich in fruits, vegetables, and grain products that contain some types of dietary fiber, particularly soluble fiber, may reduce the risk of heart disease.
- Soluble fiber, as part of a diet low in saturated

fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease.

- Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol that include 25 grams of soy protein a day may reduce the risk of heart disease.
- Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and as low as possible in *trans* fat, may reduce the risk of heart disease.
- Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol that include two servings of foods that provide a daily total of at least 3.4 grams of plant stanol esters in two meals may reduce the risk of heart disease.
- Diets rich in whole grain foods and other plant foods and low in total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease and some cancers.
- Diets low in sodium may reduce the risk of high blood pressure.
- Diets containing foods that are a good source of potassium and that are low in sodium may reduce the risk of high blood pressure and stroke.

BIRTH DEFECTS

- Healthful diets with adequate folate may reduce a woman's risk of having a child with a brain or spinal cord defect.

TOOTH DECAY

- Sugar alcohols do not promote tooth decay.
- Drinking fluoridated water may reduce the risk of tooth decay.

given between zero and three stars based on its final score. The most beneficial foods get three Guiding Stars, and the least beneficial foods get zero.

You can use the stars in several different ways to help you make the healthiest choices. For example, if one brand of tomato soup has two stars and another has three, the three-star soup is the better pick according to Guiding Stars. Guiding Stars can also help you decide among different forms of the same food. If you compare fresh broccoli, frozen broccoli florets, and broccoli in cheese sauce, you'll see that the fresh and frozen broccoli each have three Guiding Stars but the sauce-covered broccoli has fewer stars, because it is higher in fat and sodium. A fresh orange has more stars (3) than orange juice (2) because it has more fiber.

Guiding Stars can also help shoppers make good choices when nutrition information is not readily available on the package. For example, until January 2012, the government did not require nutrition labeling on fresh meat and poultry. Markets must

now either label individual packages or display a poster with nutrition information. But it may be easier for you to look for the Guiding Stars rating on the shelf to help you find the healthiest picks. You can also find Guiding Stars ratings in the produce and bakery sections, where foods may not be labeled with nutrition information.

Guiding Stars is used in over 1,600 supermarkets across the United States and has even started appearing in hospitals and schools. Information from Guiding Stars is also available on the Web at www.guidingstars.com and on the go through either the Shopper Pro or Shopper Lite smartphone apps.

The NuVal Nutritional Scoring System is another handy aid available in stores all over the United States. The NuVal system rates the nutrition content of foods on a scale of 1 to 100 using a formula that was developed by nutrition and medical experts. The NuVal formula considers more than the Nutrition Facts panel and ingredients; it incorporates 30 different nutrients, ingredients, and desirable nutri-



tion factors such as antioxidants. Nutrients that help to promote good health give foods a higher score, and nutrients that potentially harm health lower their scores. The NuVal formula also evaluates how strong the relationship is between a nutrient and particular health conditions—for example, saturated fat and heart disease—and takes that into account. Sample ratings and other information are available on NuVal's site, www.nuval.com.

Detractors, however, have pointed out that while Guiding Stars has published its scoring system, NuVal has not made the specifics of how it rates foods public. Some have also questioned the scores NuVal has given certain foods. For example, iceberg lettuce was given the same score as spinach, even though spinach is known for having a high density of healthy nutrients and iceberg lettuce is not. Similarly, canned mandarin oranges in syrup, though not perhaps the healthiest food choice, received a worse score than Diet Coke.

Dr. David Katz, the lead researcher behind NuVal, has defended the system and the scores that critics have cited. He says NuVal's scores accurately reflect the nutritional content of the foods rated and that it is precisely because the actual healthfulness of foods can be so different from what one would expect that NuVal is such a vital consumer tool.

Other systems to help in making healthy choices are available on the Web and as apps on mobile devices. Some, such as Fooducate, allow shoppers to scan a product's bar code and see a nutrition summary for that product. Fooducate's summaries display an A-to-F grade for each food as well as calories per serving, key nutrients, and nutrition highlights.

Information on the front of the package

In addition to the Nutrition Facts panel and scores or ratings on the grocery shelf, certain words or symbols on the fronts of food packages also contain useful information for shoppers. Front-of-package information calls attention to particular information to help shoppers identify potentially good choices and spend less time reading labels. "The information that you find on the front of the food package is an invitation to turn certain packages over to find out

PER SERVING



more," says Judy Caplan, MS, RD, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Many package labels display claims related to particular nutrients or ingredients. In these "nutrient content" claims, food companies can only use terms as the government has defined them. For example, a food marked "low calorie" must have no more than 40 calories per serving. "Low-fat" foods must have 3 grams of fat or less per serving, and "reduced-fat" foods must have 25% less fat than a standard preparation of the food (even if that's still quite a lot of fat). A food that is "sugar-free" has less than 0.5 gram, or about 1/8 teaspoon, of sugar per serving. However, foods labeled "no added sugar" may not be sugar-free if they contain ingredients that naturally contain sugars, such as fruit or milk.

Food manufacturers may also print certain health claims on food packages. These claims describe the relationship between a particular food or nutrient and a particular medical condition or health risk. These claims are also regulated by the government. For examples of permissible health claims, see "Sample Health Claims" on page 26.



You may also see certain symbols on the fronts of food packages. One such symbol to look for is the American Heart Association Heart Check. Foods that display the Heart Check logo have been approved by the American Heart Association for being low in sodium as well as total, saturated, and *trans* fats. To receive the check, foods also have to be good sources of at least one of the following beneficial nutrients: vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, calcium, protein, or dietary fiber. The Heart Check does not, however, provide any numbers. You still need to look at the Nutrition Facts panel for information on the specific amounts of these nutrients.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size: 1 cup (56 g)

Servings Per Container: about 8

Amount Per Serving

Calories 210 Calories from Fat 25

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 2.5g **4%**

Saturated Fat 0.5g **2%**

Trans Fat 0g

Polyunsaturated Fat 1g

Monounsaturated Fat 1g

Cholesterol 0mg **0%**

Sodium 250mg **10%**

Potassium 210mg **6%**

Total Carbohydrate 44g **15%**

Dietary Fiber 5g **18%**

Soluble Fiber 2g

Sugars 10g

Other Carbohydrate 29g

Protein 6g

Vitamin A 10%

Vitamin C 10%

Calcium 10%

Iron 10%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

	Calories:	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Potassium		3,500mg	3,500mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

grain foods every day," says Caplan. Foods can be marked with one of two Whole Grains Stamps: The basic stamp appears on foods that are the equivalent of at least half a serving of whole grains, and the 100% stamp may only be placed on foods that count as a full whole-grain serving and contain no grains that are not whole grains.

Interestingly, a study conducted by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health found that while grain products bearing the Whole Grains Stamp were higher in fiber and lower in *trans* fat than those not bearing the stamp, they were also significantly higher in sugar and calories. Once again, it's a good idea to use the front-of-package information as a prompt to turn the package over and read the Nutrition Facts panel.

The government has also been trying to develop a system to provide better nutrition information on the front of food packages. But with no new government regulations in place, numerous food companies and grocery trade groups worked together to create their own system, Facts Up Front, for the front of the food package (see page 27).

Food and beverage companies that participate in the Facts Up Front program list the size of a single serving and the amounts per serving of nutrients that should be limited, including calories, saturated fat, sodium, and sugar. Companies may also include information on up to two nutrients that benefit health—including potassium, fiber, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, vitamin D, calcium, and iron—as long as a single serving provides an adequate amount of that nutrient to meet the FDA's requirements for a "good source." Small packages of foods and soft drinks with limited space for information are allowed to just list the number of calories if they want to.

The Facts Up Front panel may also provide information on how the amounts of certain nutrients compare to each's recommended daily amount, known as the Daily Value, or DV. If you look at sodium on the label on page 27, for example, you'll see that the 410 mg (milligrams) of sodium per serving equals 17% of the total amount of sodium that is recommended for a whole day.

Try to look for products with a low DV for sat fat (saturated fat) and sodium and a higher DV for "healthy" nutrients, such as potassium and vitamin A. Calories and sugars do not have set daily recommendations. Your age, activity level, and sex affect your calorie needs. Sugars, especially added sugars, supply calories but no nutrition and therefore should be kept to a minimum. □



EAT 48g OR MORE OF WHOLE GRAINS DAILY



EAT 48g OR MORE OF WHOLE GRAINS DAILY

Another symbol to look for is the Whole Grains Stamp. "The Whole Grains Stamp identifies foods that are made with whole grains to help shoppers follow the recommendation in the [USDA's] Dietary Guidelines to eat at least three servings of whole-

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