



Ask a Nutritionist

by Tara Postnikoff

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Q: What should runners be looking for on food product labels?

A: You can get a lot of information about what you are buying from the “Nutrition Facts” label, but it doesn’t necessarily give you the whole story. A 2016 Canadian Senate report entitled “Obesity in Canada” states that the Nutrition Facts table is due for an overhaul and recommends that the marketing claims on unhealthy products (that are highly processed or have low nutritional value) should be restricted so they are not misleading. To read the full report, search online for “Canada senate report on obesity”.

The Nutrition Facts label provides estimated information on the food’s caloric content and breakdowns for total fat, saturated and trans fat, total carbohydrates, fibre, sugar, protein, cholesterol, sodium, calcium, iron, vitamin A and vitamin C. If you are using these numbers to count calories, it is important to note that these values are all lab estimates and may not accurately reflect what is in the product or how your body will absorb the calories and nutrients (especially after it is cooked). Food companies may use a number of different methods to estimate calories, so there could be a margin for error of up to 20%, meaning that 150 calories could mean 130 or 180 calories. Also, make sure you are aware of the serving size, as often what we put on our plates is double or triple the serving size listed.

Of all the components on the Nutrition Facts label, there are two values to immediately check before purchasing: sodium and sugar. It is recommended for most people to keep sodium levels under 2500 mg per day (or approximately 1 teaspoon of sodium). Sugar is added to many products including ones we don’t think of as sweet, such as soup or salad dressing. The World Health Organization recommends limiting sugar to no more than 10% of total daily energy intake and a reduction to 5% for additional health benefits. Put into context, that 10% is no more than 20 grams in a 2000-calorie diet, or 5 teaspoons of added sugar.

Beyond the Nutrition Facts label, it can be even more revealing to study the ingredients list. Food packages and labels must list ingredients from largest to smallest by weight, with the exception of food additives, which can be listed at the end of the list in any order. Here is a list of

five things I scan for when reading an ingredients list, to make sure they are NOT in the product:

1. Artificial sweeteners such as aspartame, sucralose and acesulfame potassium, as well as sugar alcohols such as xylitol, mannitol and sorbitol.

2. Artificial flavours and colours. Natural flavours and colours are not as pure as they may sound; the term “natural” does not imply healthy or wholesome, but merely indicates that they are derived from natural sources.

3. Sugar and its variations, including refined sugar, glucose, fructose, dextrose, corn syrup, cane syrup, organic cane sugar/syrup, invert sugar, high fructose corn syrup, molasses, rice syrup, and maltodextrin. Honey, maple syrup and fruit juices may sound healthier, but they are also sources of added sugar.

4. Trans and hydrogenated fats and oils. Also be on the lookout for the terms “partially hydrogenated,” “fractionated” and “modified” in the ingredient lists. These types of fats have been modified chemically to change their state and should be avoided.

5. Low-fat and fat-free dairy. To keep the creamy texture, many additives such as gums, stabilizers, and emulsifiers are added, making the product more processed.

Generally speaking, try to choose whole foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, and limit the number of packaged foods you buy. Be careful trusting the front of the package, as it is designed to grab your attention. Before putting a product in your grocery cart, turn it over and read the ingredients. Try to find food products that have the shortest ingredient list, with names you recognize and the fewest number of additives. When you don’t know what an ingredient is, do your research. A useful book on this topic is *Hard to Swallow: The Truth about Food Additives* by Doris Sarjeant. Decide which ingredients are “deal breakers” for you, and let that be your guide when making food choices. **RR**