

# Cracking the code


Understanding nutrition labels will help you make healthier food choices

by Mairlyn Smith

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**A**S OF DECEMBER 2005, Health Canada has made it mandatory for manufacturers to include nutrition information on most pre-packaged foods, in the hopes that Canadians will read the labels and make smarter choices. But do you really know what those numbers mean?

The standard “Nutrition Facts” table lists the number of calories plus 13 core nutrients: fat (including total fat content, saturated and *trans* fats), cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates (which includes fibre and sugars), protein, calcium, iron and vitamins A & C. These 13 nutrients were selected because health professionals and scientists consider them to be important to long-term health. Nutrition labels are only a guide: they’re based on a 2000-calorie diet for adults who follow Canada’s Food Guide to the “T”, are fairly active, don’t smoke, have no markers for heart disease or diabetes and are generally healthy. So what about the rest of us? Only a qualified dietitian can tell you exactly what you should be eating based on your stats, but — armed with a few basic rules and some rudimentary math skills — reading nutrition labels can help you make better choices.



Nutrition Facts		Valeur nutritive	
Per 2 bars (46 g)			
pour 2 barres (46 g)			
Amount		% valeur	% Daily Value
Teneur		quotidienne	
Calories / Calories	220		
Fat / Lipides	9 g		
Saturated / saturés	1 g		13 %
+ Trans / trans	0 g		5 %
Cholesterol / Cholestérol	0 mg		
Sodium / Sodium	135 mg		6 %
Carbohydrate / Glucides	31 g		10 %
Fibre / Fibres	3 g		12 %
Sugars / Sucres	12 g		
Protein / Protéines	4 g		0 %
Vitamin A / Vitamine A			0 %
Vitamin C / Vitamine C			2 %
Calcium / Calcium			8 %
Iron / Fer			

## BUYER BEWARE

The first thing you need to pay attention to is the serving size. This is what the *manufacturer* deems an appropriate portion. There’s no standardization, so a serving size of one brand of crackers will differ from another brand. Always make sure you’re comparing values for the same serving size.

## CALORIES: SIZE MATTERS

The number of calories follows the serving size. You may not be shocked to discover there are 280 calories in a serving of potato chips, but, yikes, that may be for only 21 chips! When was the last time you ate a measly 21 chips? When you check out the calories, always take serving size into account.

## FAT: NAUGHTY, NICE AND DOWNRIGHT EVIL

Oh, the dreaded fat. The first number represents the total amount of fat per serving. The average woman can consume about 60 g per day; the average man 90 g. Right below is the saturated and ***trans* fat** content. Try to limit the amount of saturated fat (the naughty fats) and steer clear of foods that have *trans* fats listed. They are downright evil, contributing to both higher levels of bad cholesterol (LDL) and lower levels of good cholesterol (HDL). The exceptions to the rule are dairy products, which contain a small amount of naturally occurring *trans* fat — they aren’t as bad for you as the man-made ones.

## CHOLESTEROL: SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Your liver produces about 80% of the cholesterol in your body. The other 20% comes from your diet but, oddly enough, it’s not the amount of cholesterol in the food you eat that has the greatest effect on blood cholesterol. In fact, saturated and *trans* fats are the main contributors to dietary cholesterol. Still, the recommendation is to consume no more than 300 mg of dietary cholesterol per day (200 mg for people with heart disease). Foods high in



# Jazzy Beans

MAKES 4 SERVINGS  
1 serving: ¼ cup (175 mL)

- 2 tsp (10 mL) extra virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, diced
- 1 red pepper, diced
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 14 fl oz (398 mL) can beans in tomato sauce
- 2 tbsp (30 mL) ketchup
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) Dijon mustard
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) molasses

Heat a medium saucepan over medium heat; add the oil, onion and red pepper and sauté for three minutes.

Add the garlic, beans, ketchup, Dijon and molasses. Simmer covered for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serve.

Approximately per serving:	Cholesterol:	0 g	Vitamin A:	50%
Calories:	Sodium:	500 mg	Vitamin C:	140%
Fat:	Carbohydrate:	33 g	Calcium:	10%
Saturated Fat:	Fibre:	7 g	Iron:	20%
Trans Fat:	Protein:	7 g		

cholesterol include red meat, high-fat dairy, shrimp, lobster and eggs.

Watch for labels that claim a product is “cholesterol free”. The cholesterol free potato chip is a great example of this “smoke and mirrors” ploy. Just because there isn’t any cholesterol in something doesn’t mean there isn’t any fat.

## SODIUM: THE SILENT KILLER

Canadians consume way too much salt, upping their risk of heart attack, stroke and kidney disease. We should be limiting our sodium intake to 2,300 mg per day, and even that may be on the high side. When choosing packaged foods, aim for those with a Daily Value of 10% or less, which are considered low in sodium.

## CARBOHYDRATES: THE SUM OF ALL PARTS

Carbohydrates are made up of starches, complex carbohydrates, dietary fibre, added sugar sweeteners, and non-digestible additives. The number represents the total grams of carbohydrates in the food. Diabetics who maintain blood sugar levels by counting carbohydrates per meal rely on this number for meal planning.

## FIBRE: LOVE YOUR COLON, LOVE YOUR HEART

There are two types of fibre — soluble and insoluble — but most labels only list total fibre. Every time you eat high-fibre foods, both your heart and your colon say thank you. Most of us don’t even come close to the recommended 25-38 g per day. Look for products that have at least 2 g of fibre per serving.

## SUGAR: SNEAKY TEASPOONS

A spoonful of sugar may help the medicine go down, but it won’t help your long-term health. The number of grams here represents the amount of sugar in the packaged food, both naturally occurring and added. Divide the number by four to find out how many teaspoons (tsp) of sugar the product contains. For example, if a serving of cookies (usually two) contains 12 g of sugar, there are 3 tsp per serving, or 1 ½ per cookie. You shouldn’t exceed 10 tsp (or 40 g) of sugar per day.

## PROTEIN: BUILDING BLOCKS

We need protein to build healthy muscles, bones and teeth. Adults require a minimum of 9 g of protein for every 20 pounds of body weight, so a 140 lb woman needs 63 g of protein every day. Who knew math would come in so handy?

## VITAMINS AND MINERALS

Vitamins A and C, iron and calcium are listed *only* as a percentage of the recommended Daily Value. Need more calcium in your diet? Choose a food with a high percentage of calcium. Need less iron? Choose a food with a lower one.

There’s a lot of information to digest in such a tiny label. Remember, practice really does make perfect, so read carefully and start making educated decisions. Here’s a great example of how savvy label-reading and a few simple ingredients can make a nutritious meal out of pre-packaged foods. 