

READ THE LABEL

Introduction

This lesson gives an older adult audience an opportunity to practice reading various aspects of food labels and develop their understanding of various elements of the nutrition facts panel. Depending on participants' interests, instructors can focus on particular nutrients or use aspects of this lesson in other lessons on specific nutrients.

Preparation

1. Review the topic.

- Start with the key concepts and discussion guide. The discussion guide provides suggested questions to draw out participants' existing knowledge as well as information you can offer in response to each question.
- Consider your participant demographics and potential interests, and conduct any additional research that may be necessary to prepare for specific questions or improve your own understanding of key concepts (see "Program Guide" for suggested resources).

2. Plan your lesson structure.

- Determine whether time and resources allow for a food-based activity or whether you will use an alternate activity. This lesson includes one alternate activity, and additional activity suggestions are available in the "Program Guide."
- See "Exercise for Health" lesson for ways to incorporate physical activity into the lesson, and plan to ask participants to share their favorite ways to exercise.
- Prepare a rough timeline of your lesson and a plan to integrate discussion with the activity. Depending on available time and participant interests, you can integrate discussion topics into an activity or use discussion time to open or close the lesson.

3. Plan how to administer pre-test (as well as post-test if this is the final session). See "Program Guide" for details.

4. Prepare materials.

- Review the appropriate activity and prepare any necessary materials.
- Choose and print handouts, recipes and pre-tests.

Suggested Recipes

Recipes should provide an alternative to common processed foods high in salt, fat and/or sugar, OR use healthy foods with easily available nutrition information (canned or frozen vegetables, canned beans or fish, packaged whole grains).

- Easy Homemade Nachos
- English Muffin Pizzas
- Savory or Sweet Popcorn
- Quick Homemade Oatmeal

Suggested Handouts

- "How to Read the Nutrition Facts Panel"

Key Concepts

Food labels contain valuable information about food safety, ingredients and nutrition. Understanding food safety labels can help participants avoid both unsafe food and unnecessary waste. The nutrition facts panel and ingredient list enable consumers to make informed healthy choices. A discussion of food labels can also help participants to separate advertising claims from accurate labeling.



Discussion Guide

Primary Questions

Does anyone read ingredient lists? What do you look for? Where else on the package do you see claims about what is in the product?

- Ingredients have to be listed from greatest amount to least, so look for ingredients like whole grains or other healthful foods you recognize at the top of the list.
- Shorter ingredient lists are generally a good sign that a product doesn't have too many added sugars or other potentially harmful ingredients.
- Certain labels on food packaging are regulated by the government, but others like "all natural" or "healthy" are just brand marketing.
- In general, terms like "low" or "free" have to do with the actual amount of something (like fat or sugar) in a product, while "reduced" just means that this version of the product has less of something than the regular product. It could still have a lot!
- Remember that just because a product sounds like it has a lot of something you want or only a little of something you're trying to avoid, it may not necessarily be the healthiest choice—low fat products may be high in sugar, high protein foods may also be high in fat, etc.

Do you read the nutrition facts panel? What do you look for?

- Start by looking at serving size and servings per container. Many packages that you might consider to be a single portion—a bottle of juice or a bag of chips—may actually contain two or more servings. 20 oz. sodas actually have 2 ½ servings, and some brands of ramen noodles and microwaveable soup cups actually have 2 servings even though they look like one. (Consider inviting participants to check examples.)
- Right below the serving size are the calories and calories from fat. Remember that the actual number of calories you consume depends on how many servings of the product you eat. In general, less than 100 calories is low and more than 400 calories is high. Compare the calories from fat to the total calories. If the calories from fat are close to half the total calories, this is a fairly high-fat food.
- The next part of the label lists nutrients you generally want to limit. This includes saturated and trans fat, sugar and sodium. Eating too much of these can increase your risk for some chronic diet-related diseases, like diabetes and heart disease, as well as general weight gain.
- Towards the bottom are the important nutrients you want to be sure to get enough of—dietary fiber, protein, vitamins A and C, calcium and iron. Many fresh fruits and vegetables have plenty of these nutrients as well, but often don't have labels.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 cup
Servings Per Container 2

Amount Per Serving		% Daily Values*
Calories 310		Calories from Fat 100
Total Fat 10g		15%
Saturated Fat 3g		15%
Trans Fat 2g		
Cholesterol 20mg		7%
Sodium 500mg		21%
Total Carbohydrate 40g		13%
Dietary Fiber 4g		16%
Sugars 5g		
Protein 5g		10%
Vitamin C 20%		Calcium 5%
Iron 5%		Vitamin K 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.

Total Fat	Less than	2,000	2,500
Sat Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2400mg	2400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

1. Start here →

2. Check calories and calories from fat. Look for foods with calories from fat that are less than half the total calories →

3. These numbers (%DV) tell you about how much this food counts towards a 2000-calorie daily allowance ←

4. Look for foods with less of these (<5% DV is low) →

5. Look for foods with more of these (>20% DV is high) ←



Secondary Questions

What do you know about the dates you see on various food packages? How do you decide when to throw food away?

- There is actually very little regulation of food date labels at the national level, and you will probably see a wide variety of dates at the grocery store.
- In general, “use by” dates are the most important for food safety.
- Most other labels have more to do with store display than spoilage: “best if used by” refers more to the manufacturer’s idea of peak quality; products past this date might not look or taste as good, but are not necessarily expired. “Sell by” indicates when a food should leave the grocery store; it is often safe for a few more days in your fridge (see “Food Storage” handout).
- When in doubt, trust your senses—look at and smell food, and ask someone else to help confirm your instincts.

Does anyone use the % daily values information? What does it tell you? Why don’t sugar, trans fats, and protein have a %DV?

- %DV are based on a 2,000 calorie diet, so these numbers may be high or low for you depending on your calorie needs.
- In general, 5% or less is low and 20% or more is high.
- When reading the %DV, remember to consider whether you are looking at a nutrient to limit or an important nutrient; not getting 100% of your recommended daily intake of fat or sodium is just fine (it’s probably a good idea!), but you should be aiming for 100% of your DV for important nutrients.
- Try thinking of %DV for nutrients to limit as an “allowance.” If a food has a high percent of your daily values for fat that’s okay, but you’ll have less allowance to “spend” on other foods. Eating foods with %DV under 20% means you can spread your allowance out through the day.
- There is no %DV for sugar and trans fat because most Americans already get more than enough of these nutrients in their diets. In general it is best to keep trans fat intake as low as possible and to read the ingredients list to find out if the sugar in a product comes from natural or added sugars. If no sugars are on the ingredients list, the sugar on the nutrition facts panel is a natural sugar found in foods like milk or fruit and will be processed more slowly by your body, preventing blood sugar spikes that can be dangerous for diabetics or cause anyone to experience changes in their energy level.
- Protein is an important macronutrient, but a %DV is only required on the label if the product makes an advertising claim about protein content.

What is the maximum amount of fat, cholesterol, sugar and sodium that you should have in a day?

- Adults should keep their total intake of fat between 20% and 35% of their total daily calories. For example, someone who needs 2,000 calories a day shouldn’t have more than 750 calories from fat. There are about 9 calories per gram of fat, so that would be about 83 grams of fat.
- Older adults should eat less than 1500mg of sodium per day.
- The American Heart Association recommends that men consume no more than 9 teaspoons (37.5 grams) of added sugar, and women no more than 6 teaspoons (25 grams) per day. Nutrition labels don’t list added sugars separately from total sugars, but you can look for added sugars on the ingredients list under different names like maltose, dextrose, fructose and sucrose.



Suggested Activities

If you have access to basic ingredients and supplies, we recommend planning the lesson around a cooking demonstration or activity that will show participants concrete skills that apply the lesson concepts. If limited resources or time make a food-based activity impossible, use the alternate activity or any of the other suggested activities in the “Program Guide.”

A. Food-Based Activity: Easy Bean Salad

Combine canned vegetables and beans to make a quick and easy salad with ingredients that participants can analyze for nutrition information. We provide ideas for two variations, but feel free to adapt the basic concept further and ask participants for ideas about how to modify this recipe. You could make this a complete meal by serving with tortilla or pita chips (an additional opportunity to talk about serving sizes and label reading) or wrapping it in a whole-wheat tortilla.

Discussion points to address while preparing food (see discussion guide as well):

- What are some of your favorite types of beans? How do you like to eat beans: plain or in mixed dishes?
- What kind of canned vegetables do you like? How do you like to use canned vegetables?
- Pass around a few cans and talk through each section of the label. How many servings are in a can, and how much sodium there is in each serving? Remind participants to look for low-sodium canned vegetables and to rinse both vegetables and beans to remove extra sodium.
- Pass around packages of chips or tortillas. Looking at the ingredients list, do you see anything you don't recognize? Are there any added sugars? How much is one serving? What is the sodium content?

Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixing bowl(s): one for demo, or per group • Mixing spoon(s): one for demo, or per group • Sample dishes and spoons for each participant • Can opener(s): one for demo, or per group
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start by deciding whether the activity will be a demonstration or will be participatory. If participants will be preparing food themselves, decide whether they will work individually or in groups. • Review “Program Guide” for tips on leading a cooking demo or guiding participants through a recipe. • Review ingredients and make substitutions as necessary. • Modify recipe as necessary, and print copies for participants to take home.
Ingredients (Serves 6, 1 cup/serving)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 can beans (black or cannellini/great northern) • 2 cans vegetables (tomatoes, corn, green beans) • Tortilla or pita chips, or whole-wheat wraps • Olive oil • Variety of seasonings (oregano, thyme, basil, paprika, red pepper flakes)
Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open, drain and rinse canned beans and vegetables. • Mix canned beans and vegetables together. • Show participants the seasonings you have, mix them with a small amount of olive oil, and add them to the salad, OR invite participants to add their own seasonings to samples. • Invite participants to use chips to scoop their salad or wrap it into a tortilla.

B. Alternate Activity: Read the Label

Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Products or handouts with sample labels
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review different labels
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give participants some time to review labels on their own. • Ask questions about labels either to check for understanding of information you've already presented, or to engage participants in an exploration of the label to establish understanding (recommended). • Sample questions: Which foods have multiple servings in a package that you might think was one portion? Which food item has the most total fat per serving? Which food item has the most sodium per serving? Which food items have the most healthy nutrients?

Nutritious, Delicious Bean Salad

Combine canned vegetables and beans to make a quick and easy salad with ingredients that have easy-to-find nutrition information. We provide ideas for two variations, but feel free to adapt this basic recipe by adding different vegetables and seasonings or trying different types of beans. You could make this a complete meal by serving the bean salad with tortilla or pita chips or wrapping it in a whole-wheat tortilla.

INGREDIENTS

serves 6, 1 cup per serving

Black Bean Salad

- 2 cans black beans
- 1 can tomatoes
- 1 can corn
- Tortilla chips or whole-wheat wraps
- 1-2 tbsp olive oil
- Optional: 1-2 tsp red wine vinegar
- Cumin, paprika and/or red pepper flakes to taste

Mediterranean Bean Salad

- 2 cans white beans
- 1 can tomatoes
- 1 can green beans
- Pita chips or whole-wheat wraps
- 1-2 tbsp olive oil
- 1-2 tsp red wine vinegar
- Oregano, thyme and/or basil to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Open, drain and rinse canned beans and vegetables.
2. Mix canned beans and vegetables together.
3. Mix a small amount of seasonings with olive oil, adding more to taste.
4. Add olive oil/seasoning mixture to beans and vegetables, and mix to combine.