Nutrition facts label [1]

Love your work, Alice!

My question: I have two children who have really gotten into reading the FDA-required "Nutrition Facts" label that appears on packaged food. In particular, my son (age 7) now continually reads the labels and tries to decide "which is healthier?" The problem? The nutrition label is only on things that have packages, which are more likely to be processed foods. Is there a website or other resource that gives you the nutrition facts label for generic (and healthier) things like broccoli, watermelon, apples, dried organic lentils sold in bulk, and the like? I've searched around, but can only find this information in disparate places, and nothing as nifty-looking as that label!! Thanks, Alice!

? Mom trying to offer healthy choices, but having some technical difficulties

Answer

Dear Mom trying to offer healthy choices, but having some technical difficulties,

To think, while some children beg for the latest neon-colored sugar cereal to hit the shelves, your two children are tallying fiber grams. They have fostered their interest in nutrition. Educating about and encouraging healthy behaviors are keys to lowering risks of chronic diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, later in life.

As you are aware, the "Nutrition Facts" label is a helpful tool for understanding what each food contributes to daily nutrient intake. These labels provide the amount of carbohydrates, fat, protein, as well as percent daily values for a number of nutrients. Percent Daily Values (DV) are based on a 2000-calorie eating plan, which can be confusing, because that's more calories than most of us need. For an in-depth explanation about this or other food label content issues, check the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [2], or the Kidshealth.org Figuring Out Food Labels page [3] for kid friendly explanations.

Unfortunately, curious consumers will not find "Nutrition Fact" labels on all foods, even if foods have packaging. Some specific exceptions to food labeling requirements include:

- Ready-to-eat food that is not for immediate consumption but is prepared primarily on site, for example, bakery, deli, and candy store items
- Food shipped in bulk, as long as it is not for sale in that form to consumers
- Medical foods, such as those used to address the nutritional needs of people with certain diseases
Plain coffee and tea, some spices, and other foods that contain insignificant amounts of nutrients

Though you might not see nutrient labels on fresh foods, the information needs to be nearby. The FDA created a voluntary program to promote retailer labeling of the top 20 most commonly sold fruits, vegetables, and fish, as well as the 45 best-selling cuts of raw meat and poultry. The nutrient information needs to be available as a brochure, leaflet, notebook, or stickers in the appropriate grocery department. Labels for fruits, veggies, and raw fish include the following:

- Name of the fruit, vegetable, or fish
- Serving size
- Calories per serving
- Amount of protein, carbohydrates, fat, and sodium per serving
- Percent of the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA) for iron, calcium, and vitamins A and C per serving

For nutrient information for 5,900 foods from alfalfa sprouts to zucchini at the click of a button, look to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Nutrient Database. A simple keyword search and portion size specification will yield the complete nutrient profile of your food.

One of the most comprehensive print versions of nutrient composition tables is Bowes & Church's Food Values of Portions Commonly Used, by Jean A. T. Pennington, Ph.D. Some 8,500 foods are listed according to food group with analysis results for 30 nutrients, but they are not in "Nutrition Facts" label format.

Hopefully these resources will help make your technical difficulties with nutrition labels a thing of the past!

Alice!

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