NO PREP

Decoding the Nutrition Facts Label

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

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The Only Part of the Package Nobody Paid For

Everything on a box of food is advertising except one rectangle. The photograph, the color scheme, the claims across the front, the words chosen for the product name, all of it was designed by people whose job was to make the product move off a shelf. The Nutrition Facts panel is the exception. It is required by federal law, its format is set by the Food and Drug Administration, and the manufacturer does not get to decide what goes in it or how it looks. That makes it the single most trustworthy thing on the package, which is worth remembering given that it is usually printed on the back in the smallest type available. The panel got its first major redesign in more than twenty years when the FDA finalized new rules in 2016, with large

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Start at the Top or Everything Below It Lies

The first two lines are servings per container and serving size, and they are first for a reason. Every single number underneath them describes one serving, not the package. On an older label from before the 2016 redesign, a bottle of iced tea listing 90 calories could contain two and a half servings, which made the bottle 225 calories, and the label never said otherwise. This is the most common way a shopper

misreads a panel, and it is not a trick so much as a failure to start at the top. Serving size is also frequently misunderstood in a second way. It is not a recommendation and it never was. Serving sizes are standardized reference amounts set by the FDA so that competing products can be compared fairly, and they are based on how much people typically consume in one sitting. That standardization is the entire value of the panel, because it means a shopper comparing two cereals is comparing the same amount of each. It says nothing at all about how much any particular person should eat. Calories come next, in the largest type on the panel, and they describe energy in one serving. Below that the panel splits into two informal halves that are worth reading differently. The upper block lists nutrients most Americans should limit: saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, and added sugars. The lower block lists nutrients most Americans should get more of: dietary fiber, vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium. Reading top-down without knowing which half is which turns the panel into an undifferentiated wall of numbers, which is roughly how most people experience it.

The Percent Daily Value Column and the Five and Twenty Rule

The right-hand column, labeled percent Daily Value, is the part shoppers skip most often and the part that does the most work. It converts every raw gram and milligram figure into a share of a full day, which spares a person from memorizing what 480 milligrams of sodium means. Percent Daily Value is calculated against a 2,000 calorie reference diet, and the panel prints a footnote saying exactly that. The reference is a standard for comparison, not a personal target, and an active teenage athlete and a sedentary adult are both reading numbers built on the same 2,000 calorie assumption. The quick interpretation rule is worth memorizing because it works on every nutrient on the panel. Five percent Daily Value or less is low. Twenty percent Daily Value or more is high. Whether low or high is good news depends entirely on which nutrient is being read. Twenty percent of the day's fiber in one serving is excellent. Twenty percent of the day's sodium in one serving means three more servings like it would fill the entire day's allowance. That single rule lets a shopper evaluate an unfamiliar product without doing arithmetic. The Daily Values behind the percentages are set amounts worth knowing for the nutrients that matter most: 2,300 milligrams of sodium, 50 grams of added sugars, 20 grams of saturated fat, 28 grams of dietary fiber, and 300 milligrams of cholesterol. Protein

normally shows no percentage at all, which confuses people. The FDA does not require one unless a protein claim is made on the package, because protein deficiency is genuinely rare in the United States.

Added Sugars, and Why That Line Was Fought Over

The added sugars line is the newest thing on the panel and it was the most contested part of the 2016 redesign, which is a reasonable clue that it is useful. Total sugars counts every sugar molecule in the food regardless of origin, so a container of plain yogurt shows sugar on the panel because milk naturally contains lactose, and an apple would show sugar because fruit contains fructose. Added sugars counts only what a manufacturer put in during processing, including cane sugar, honey, maple syrup, fruit juice concentrate, and high fructose corn syrup. The distinction matters because naturally occurring sugar in whole food arrives packaged with fiber, water, protein, or micronutrients, while added sugar arrives with none of that. The Nutrition Facts panel measures added sugars against a Daily Value of 50 grams, and a single 20-ounce regular soda contains about 65 grams by itself. That Daily Value matched the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines limit of ten percent of daily calories; the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines, published in January 2026, replaced that percentage with a recommendation that no single meal contain more than 10 grams of added sugars. The ingredient list is the panel's companion and answers questions the numbers cannot. Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight, so whatever appears first is the largest component. It is also where sugar hides most effectively, because a manufacturer can split sweeteners into several forms, listing cane syrup, dextrose, and fruit juice concentrate separately so that no single one rises high enough on the list to draw attention. Learning the aliases helps, and most of them end in the letters ose, though maltodextrin, molasses, agave nectar, and evaporated cane juice do not. The panel gives the total. The ingredient list shows how it got there.

Two Labels, One Cart, Fifteen Seconds

Comparing two products is where the panel earns its place, and it works best as a fixed sequence rather than as general browsing. Start by confirming that the serving sizes actually match, because two granola bars, two cereals, or two yogurts are not always measured in the same amount, and comparing 55 grams of one against 40 grams of the other produces a conclusion that is simply wrong. Next check

servings per container, which reveals whether the package is one serving or several. Then read the limit nutrients, meaning sodium, saturated fat, and added sugars, using the five and twenty rule rather than the raw numbers. Then read the nutrients worth seeking, meaning fiber, calcium, iron, potassium, and vitamin D. Finally, glance at the first three ingredients, which describe most of what the food actually is. That sequence takes about fifteen seconds per product with practice, and it is the difference between choosing food and choosing packaging. It also exposes patterns that front-of-package claims are designed to obscure. Reduced fat products frequently carry more added sugar than the originals, because removing fat removes flavor that has to be replaced. Products advertising whole grain on the front sometimes list refined flour first in the ingredients. A drink marketed with fruit imagery may contain a few percent juice and a great deal of added sweetener. None of that is illegal and none of it is hidden. It is printed on the back, in the one rectangle nobody paid to design, waiting for a shopper who knows the order to read it in.

Key Information: Reading the Nutrition Facts Panel

Detail	Information
Who Sets the Format	The FDA; the manufacturer cannot change it
Redesign Compliance	January 2020 for large firms, January 2021 for small firms
Read First	Servings per container and serving size; all numbers describe one serving
Serving Size Meaning	A standardized reference amount for comparison, not a recommendation
Percent Daily Value Basis	A 2,000 calorie reference diet
The 5 and 20 Rule	5 percent DV or less is low; 20 percent DV or more is high
Added Sugars	Only sugar added in processing; the panel's Daily Value is 50 g per day

Detail	Information
Ingredient List Order	Descending by weight, so the first ingredient is the largest

Case Study: Jordan and the Better Granola

Jordan was sent to the store with one job: pick the healthier granola. He found two bags side by side. The first was covered in words, including natural, made with whole grains, and a photograph of oats on a wooden table. The second bag was plain. Jordan flipped both over. The plain bag listed a serving size of one third cup with 4 grams of added sugars and 4 grams of fiber. The bag with the photograph listed one quarter cup with 11 grams of added sugars and 2 grams of fiber. "The servings aren't even the same size," he said out loud, in the cereal aisle. He did the comparison at the same amount and the gap got wider rather than smaller. Then he read the first ingredient on each. The plain bag said whole rolled oats. The photographed bag said cane syrup. Jordan bought the plain one and texted a picture of both panels to his sister, who had asked him to get the one with the nicer bag.

1. Jordan noticed the serving sizes were different before comparing anything else. Explain why that step had to come first.

2. Both bags were labeled accurately and neither broke any rule. Explain how the front of the second bag still misled shoppers.

Multiple Choice

1. A bottle lists 90 calories and 2.5 servings per container. Drinking the whole bottle supplies:

a) 180 calories, because partial servings are not counted

b) 36 calories, because 90 is divided among the servings

c) 90 calories, because the label describes the container

d) 225 calories, because each serving supplies 90

2. Under the 5 and 20 rule, a food listing 24 percent Daily Value for sodium is:

a) Impossible to judge without knowing the person's exact age

b) About average, since 24 percent is near one quarter

c) High in sodium, since 20 percent or more counts as high

d) Low in sodium, and a good choice for limiting salt

3. Plain yogurt lists total sugars but zero added sugars. The sugar shown comes from:

a) Lactose, the sugar naturally present in milk

b) A labeling error the FDA permits on dairy products

c) Fruit juice concentrate used to thicken the yogurt

d) Sweetener the manufacturer added before packaging

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Serving Size	A) The shortcut treating 5 percent as low and 20 percent as high
2. ___ Percent Daily Value	B) Sweeteners put in during processing rather than naturally present
3. ___ Added Sugars	C) Components ranked from heaviest to lightest by weight
4. ___ The 5 and 20 Rule	D) A nutrient shown as a share of a 2,000 calorie day
5. ___ Ingredient List	E) A standardized reference amount that lets two products be compared

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Percent Daily Value is calculated against a _____ calorie diet.

2. Ingredients are listed in descending order by _____.

3. The Nutrition Facts panel uses a Daily Value of _____ grams for added sugars.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why the Nutrition Facts panel is more trustworthy than the front of the package.

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain why total sugars and added sugars are listed as two separate lines.

3. Explain how a manufacturer can keep sugar from appearing high in an ingredient list.