NO PREP

Reading Nutrition Labels

High School Student's Guide

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

Name: Period: Date:

Reading Nutrition Labels: High School Student's Guide

Why Labels Matter and How to Interpret Them

Nutrition labels are like a hidden manual telling you what's really inside your snack or meal. They show serving sizes, calorie counts, and various nutrients. Understanding them can help you make wiser choices, whether you're picking a breakfast cereal or a sports drink. Many teens overlook these labels, but a little effort can go a long way in steering you toward foods that support energy, focus, and overall health. If you're curious about how much sugar or sodium you're actually consuming, the label is your best friend. One of the first things to examine is the serving size. This number indicates how much of the product counts as a single

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Decoding Sugars, Sodium, and Daily Values

Hidden sugars are particularly tricky. A product can claim to be "healthy" while containing a surprising amount of added sugar listed under names like fructose, dextrose, or cane syrup. Checking the "Added Sugars" line can reveal how much sugar is pumped into a product beyond what naturally occurs in foods like fruits or dairy. Too much added sugar can lead to energy spikes followed by crashes, making it

harder to concentrate or perform well in sports. Sodium is another element to watch. It helps regulate fluid balance but is easily overconsumed when you rely heavily on processed foods. High sodium intake can contribute to issues like high blood pressure over time. Teens often need around 2,300 milligrams or fewer per day, but some frozen meals or snacks can exceed half of that in just one serving. Awareness is key. If you see a label with 800 milligrams of sodium in one portion, consider how that factors into your overall daily intake. Next, you might notice % Daily Value percentages on the label. These figures are based on a 2,000-calorie diet and give you a quick snapshot: 5% or less is considered low for a nutrient, while 20% or more is high. Use these percentages to decide if a food is offering a lot of a beneficial nutrient (like fiber) or too much of something you want to limit, like saturated fat.

Comparing Labels for Smarter Shopping

One of the best habits you can adopt is label comparison. If you're choosing between two types of granola bars, look at the sugar, protein, and fiber content. This allows you to spot which bar offers more of what you need and less of what you don't. Maybe one bar has 8 grams of protein and 5 grams of sugar, while another has 2 grams of protein and 12 grams of sugar. Even though both might be marketed as "wholesome," the label clarifies which is truly better for your goals. When you're in the grocery store, try to scan the label of at least one new product each trip. Over time, you'll build a mental library of healthier options: ones with lower sodium, fewer added sugars, and higher fiber or protein. Learning to compare labels also helps you see through buzzwords like "natural" or "fortified," which can be misleading if you don't check the facts. If you notice one cereal is loaded with vitamins but also comes with 20 grams of sugar per serving, you'll know it's not the best pick. Don't forget to look at the ingredient list, usually located below or beside the Nutrition Facts panel. Ingredients are listed from highest to lowest quantity. If you see sugar or hydrogenated oils near the top, that's a sign the product might not align with your health goals. By comparing labels, you can still enjoy convenience foods, just with a better grasp of their nutritional profile.

Making Mindful Choices: Small Steps Toward Better Health

Getting in the habit of reading labels doesn't mean you have to give up favorite treats entirely. Instead, it empowers you to find balance. If you spot that your usual

crackers are high in sodium, you might switch to a low-sodium variety and add a piece of fruit for sweetness. Even small changes like this can gradually reshape your diet. Over time, you may notice more stable energy levels, improved focus in class, and fewer cravings for overly processed snacks. It's also worth noting that not all low-calorie or low-fat items are automatically healthy. Some might compensate with higher sugar levels or artificial additives. The key is looking at the whole picture: does the food provide nutrients your body needs, or is it mostly empty calories? By staying curious and aware, you'll gain the confidence to make decisions that genuinely support your goals, whether that's maintaining energy for sports, managing weight, or simply feeling better throughout the day.

Key Information: Quick Label-Reading Reference Table

Item on Label	What It Tells You	Why It Matters
Serving Size	Amount the nutritional data is based on	Helps you compare your actual portion to the listed size
Total Calories	Energy content of one serving	Guides you in understanding overall intake
Added Sugars	Extra sugar beyond what naturally occurs	High amounts can lead to energy crashes
Sodium	Essential mineral but overconsumption is common	Too much may raise blood pressure over time
% Daily Value	How a serving fits into a 2,000-calorie diet	Quick gauge of whether something is high or low in a nutrient

Case Study Excerpt

Carla was a health-conscious high school junior, but she always felt tired during afternoon classes. She assumed she was eating well—she chose cereal labeled "whole grain" for breakfast and low-fat yogurt for lunch. However, when a friend challenged her to read labels more closely, Carla was startled. Her cereal contained nearly 15 grams of added sugar per serving, and the low-fat yogurt had even more sugar than the cereal. Eager to fix her energy slump, Carla decided to switch to a cereal with only 5 grams of added sugar and plain yogurt sweetened with fresh fruit. Within a few weeks, she noticed her mid-afternoon energy crash started to fade. Though she initially missed the super-sweet taste, she discovered that her new choices actually kept her full longer and helped her stay more alert in class. Carla realized that even products advertised as "healthy" can be deceptive if you don't dig deeper. By learning to read labels, she felt more control over her diet and found she could make small adjustments that made a big difference in her daily energy.

1. What hidden issue did Carla discover in her usual "healthy" choices?

_____

_____

2. How did she change her routine, and what were the results?

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. The % Daily Value figures are based on:
    a) A 1,000-calorie daily diet
    b) A 2,000-calorie daily diet
    c) A random scale not tied to calories
    d) Each individual's unique needs

2. High levels of added sugar in foods can lead to:

a) Reduced craving for sweets

b) Prolonged, stable energy throughout the day

c) Quick spikes followed by energy crashes

d) No impact on energy or focus

3. Comparing nutrition labels between products can:

a) Reveal differences in sugar, sodium, or nutrients

b) Confuse you more than help

c) Make you eat only fast food

d) Guarantee that all items on the shelf are equally nutritious

Matching

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

Term	Definition
1. ___ Serving Size	A) Key resource to see if sugar or salt is high on the list
2. ___ Added Sugars	B) A mineral that can raise blood pressure if consumed excessively
3. ___ % Daily Value	C) Reflects sugar added during processing
4. ___ Ingredient List	D) The portion used for all data on the label
5. ___ Sodium	E) Shows what percentage of daily nutrient needs a serving offers

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Many "healthy" cereals can still have high _____ levels that lead to energy crashes.

2. The _____ on a label tells you how much of each nutrient you get from one serving.

3. Teens should compare labels to find options with less added sugar and lower _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why might a product labeled "low fat" still be unhealthy?

2. In what ways can reading labels improve both athletic performance and academic focus?

3. How could you apply this label-reading skill when picking out snacks for a long study session?