

# Cardiac Rehabilitation: Reading the Food Label

When you are part of a cardiac rehabilitation program, your healthcare team will help you use the tools available to make choices that can reduce your heart disease risk factors and improve your heart health. One of these tools is the nutrition facts food label located on all pre-packaged food products.

The food label is a valuable tool but many people have trouble using it. In group classes or through one on one counseling, your cardiac rehab team will help you learn how to use the food label to help you make heart healthy food choices.

The food label includes information about number of servings in the container, serving size and the amount of calories per serving, types of fat and cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrate (which includes fiber), total sugars, protein, and the amount of nutrients.

Based on your individual heart disease risk factors, you may be told to pay more attention to specific parts of the food label. For example, if your blood pressure is high, you will want to pay particular attention to the sodium content on the food label.

Let's start by looking at the serving size. All information on the nutrition fact label is based on the serving size. Compare the listed serving size to the amount you actually eat. If you eat more or less than the serving size listed, you will need to adjust all the values on the food label to get an accurate picture of what you are eating.

For example, when you look at the calories, the label shows you the amount of calories in the listed serving size. If you eat more or less, adjust the total calories. When trying to lose weight, knowing the number of calories you are eating is a big help.

Now let's take a look at fats. Some types of fats, like unsaturated fats, can be good for you. They are found in foods like olives and olive oil, avocados, nuts and seeds, and fish and can improve your heart health. But other types of fats, like saturated fats and trans fats, increase the level of bad cholesterol in your body and increase your risk of heart disease. Saturated fats are solid at room temperature. Limit butter, whole milk, cheese and fatty meats.

Sodium is another ingredient that needs to be limited. Foods high in sodium can raise your blood pressure. Aim to eat less than 1500 mg per day for good heart health. Talk to your healthcare provider about your sodium goal. A quick tip, if a food's daily value is 20% or higher, it is high in sodium and you may want to find a healthier option.

Take a look at the amount of carbohydrate listed on the food label. You need to eat carbohydrate every day for energy, so make your choices healthy. The healthiest carbs also provide fiber, so be sure to look at the number of grams of fiber per serving. Fiber can help lower bad cholesterol, so aim for at least 25 to 35 grams per day to help your heart.

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And pay attention to how much total sugar, including the amount of added sugar, is listed on the label. Although sugar may help to give food flavor, too much of it in what you eat can lead to higher cholesterol levels, weight gain and other health issues.

The food label also includes the amount of protein, vitamin D, calcium, iron and potassium. Many people need to get more of these nutrients in their daily lives.

Also, keep in mind that the daily percentages listed are based on someone who needs 2000 calories a day. Depending on your age and activity level, you may not need that many. Talk to your healthcare provider about how many calories you should eat each day.

The food label can give you a lot of valuable information during cardiac rehabilitation and for a lifetime, but you have to know how to read it. Talk to your cardiac rehab team about how to use this tool to choose heart healthy foods now and in the future.