**Title: How to Read a Food Label**

Almost all packaged food sold in the United States contains a nutrition label. Though not perfect, these labels give us plenty of important information about what’s in the food we’re about to eat. But what exactly do food labels say?

**Serving Size and Calories**

Let’s start at the top. The first thing the food label tells us is the most important thing: serving size. All of the other information on this label assumes you have eaten this amount of food. So the first thing you should do is ask yourself “Is this how much I ate?” For example, a pint of ice cream may list a serving size of one-half cup. Did you eat half a cup or did you eat half the pint? If you ate just one half cup, then the nutrition label tells you exactly how many calories, fat, sugar, and vitamins you just consumed. If you ate something closer to half the pint, you’ll need to look at the next bit of information: servings per container.

This information lets you know how many servings are in the entire container or package of food. In our example of 1 pint of ice cream, if each serving is ½ cup, then there are 4 servings in the entire container. So if you ate half the container, you had 2 servings. You’ll need to multiply all of the remaining information on the label by 2.

Next is calories per serving. This tells you how many calories are in one serving of the food. If you ate more or less than one serving, you’ll need to do some quick math to adjust this number.

**Things to Limit**

Let’s keep moving down the label. Next we get into the things we should limit in our diet: fats (especially saturated fat), cholesterol, and sodium. The amount of each item in one serving is listed next to the name.

**Things to Get Enough Of**

After listing carbohydrates and protein, the label lists at least four vitamins and minerals: vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, and calcium. Some labels may also include other vitamins and minerals, but these four must be listed. Along with fiber, these are the things you want to make sure and get enough of in your diet.

**The Ingredients List**

Now we’ve come to the end of the food label: the ingredients. Food labels list all ingredients in the food by weight. The most prevalent ingredient is listed first and the least prevalent ingredient is listed last. This is where you can find out more about the specific things in your food, like if there are added sugars or whole grains. We’ll cover this in more detail in future articles.

**The % Daily Value**

Now what about those percentages on the far right-hand side of the label? These are called the “% Daily Value” and provide some useful information, as well. But what is a “% Daily Value”? Researchers who study nutrition have come up with the recommended amount of each nutrient you should get each day. These recommendations are often different for different people. For example, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding need more calcium than other women. Or, the recommended amount of fat that you eat each day depends on the total number of calories you consume. Since one food label can’t list percentages for all the different possibilities, the % Daily Value bases everything on a 2,000 calorie diet. So if you don’t eat exactly 2,000 calories a day, is this information still useful? Yes, it is.

Use the % Daily Value to find out whether or not the food is high or low in a certain nutrient with a quick glance. In general, if the % Daily Value is 5% or less, the food is low in that nutrient. If it’s 20% or higher, it’s high in that nutrient. So if you’re trying to eat more calcium-rich foods, look for a food that has 20% or more of your % Daily Value in calcium. Or, if you’re trying to cut down how much sodium you eat, look for foods that have 5% or less of your % Daily Value of sodium.

If you’re not already in a habit of reading food labels, start looking more closely at them today. Who knows what you’ll discover?

**Sources**:

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. (2015, April 9). How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label. Retrieved August 14, 2015, from <http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm>

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. (2012, July). Labeling & Nutrition - Sodium in Your Diet: Using the Nutrition Facts Label to Reduce Your Intake. Retrieved August 18, 2015, from <http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm315393.htm>