

Food Labels

For diabetes meal planning

This handout explains how to read food labels and how to use this information to make healthful food choices when you are living with diabetes.

What's on a Food Label

Labels on packaged foods tell you how many calories and grams of carbohydrate, fat, and protein are in the product. They also tell you how much cholesterol, sodium (salt), and fiber the food contains. Knowing how to read food labels can help to make healthful food choices.

And, if you “count carbs,” the information on food labels can also help you keep track of how many grams of carbohydrate you are eating.

Using the “Nutrition Facts” Label

Serving Size

Always check the **Nutrition Facts** label to see what it calls “1 serving.” The serving size on the label may not be the amount you are eating. If a serving size is ½ cup and you are eating 1 cup, you are actually eating 2 servings.

This is important to know. All other numbers on the Nutrition Facts label are based on that serving size.

Also, note that the grams listed next to “serving size” are the **weight** of the food. This is **not** the same as the grams of carbohydrate.

Total Carbohydrate

Total carbohydrate grams are listed in bold type on a Nutrition Facts label. The total carbohydrate in a product includes dietary fiber, sugars, sugar alcohols, or other carbohydrates.



The Nutrition Facts label lists the total carbohydrate grams contained in 1 serving of the product.

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
Serving size	2/3 cup (55g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	230
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 8g	10%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 37g	13%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 235mg	6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

On food labels, look for:

- Serving size
- Total Carbohydrate

You can ignore the “% Daily Value” column on the food label. This number is based on how many carbohydrates are eaten in the entire day. You do not need this information to count carbohydrates.

Finding the Amount of Carbohydrates You Are Eating

- Use standard measuring cups or spoons to place the food you want to eat into the bowl or glass you usually use. Once you see how much space this takes up, you won’t have to measure this food every time you eat it.
- Find the serving size on the Nutrition Facts label. When you measure your food, it will be easiest to use the same standard of measurement shown on the label. For instance, if the serving size is given in tablespoons, use a tablespoon to measure your food.
- To calculate the total number of carbohydrates you are eating, multiply the Total Carbohydrates listed on the label by the number of servings you are actually eating.

Example:

- You are eating $1\frac{1}{3}$ cups of cereal.
- The serving size on the Nutrition Facts label is $\frac{2}{3}$ cup, which contains 37 grams of carbohydrate.
- Your $1\frac{1}{3}$ cup of cereal = 2 servings:
2 servings x 37 grams = **74 grams of Total Carbohydrate**

Carbohydrates with Less Effect on Blood Glucose

Fiber

On a Nutrition Facts label, Dietary Fiber is listed beneath the Total Carbohydrate. When eating foods that contain carbohydrates, choose high-fiber foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables and whole grains whenever you can, instead of processed foods. Look for foods that have at least 3 grams of fiber per serving. Most people do not need to subtract the amount of fiber from Total Carbohydrates when counting carbohydrates. Please ask your dietitian to explain.

Sugar Alcohols

Sugar alcohols occur naturally in many fruits and vegetables. They can also be man-made, such as sorbitol, maltitol, and xylitol.

Sugar alcohols are digested slowly and are not fully absorbed by the body. Like fiber, they may raise blood glucose less than other carbs. Please ask your dietitian to explain.

Nutrition Facts		
Serving Size: About (20g)		
Servings Per Container: 16		
	Amount Per Serving	% Daily Value*
Total Calories	60	
Calories From Fat	15	
Total Fat	2 g	3%
Saturated Fat	1 g	4%
Trans Fat	0 g	
Cholesterol	0 mg	0%
Sodium	45 mg	2%
Total Carbohydrates	15 g	5%
Dietary Fiber	4 g	17%
Sugars	4 g	
Sugar Alcohols (Polyols)	3 g	
Protein	2 g	

This Nutrition Facts label shows sugar alcohols.

Eating too many foods that contain sugar alcohols may cause gas, bloating, and diarrhea. But, when eaten in small amounts, these foods may help you manage your weight and control your blood glucose.

“Sugar-Free” and “No Sugar Added”

Foods with “sugar-free” or “no sugar added” on the label may still have carbohydrates and calories. These words just mean the food was made without *added* sugar. It does **not** mean it has no carbohydrates.

There may be other types of carbohydrates in “sugar-free” foods. “Sugar-free” foods may have even more calories than foods that contain sugar. They can be higher in fat, too.

For instance, “sugar-free” apple pie contains apples and flour. Both of these are sources of carbohydrate.

Another example is ice cream with “no sugar added.” Look at the Nutrition Facts labels below:

- The label on the left is from a carton of “no sugar added” ice cream. The 15 grams of carbohydrate listed in this come from the milk.
- The label on the right is from a carton of regular ice cream. The regular ice cream has just 1 more carbohydrate gram than the product with “no sugar added”.

Always check “Total Carbohydrates” to see how many grams of carbohydrate you are eating, even if a product says it is low in sugar.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Diabetes Institute:
206.598.4882

UW Medicine Neighborhood
Clinics: 206.520.5000

Other patients: Please call your
healthcare provider:

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1/2 cup (68 g)
Servings per Container 4

Amount Per Serving	
Calories	Calories from Fat
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 5g	8%
Saturated Fat 3g	14%
Trans Fat	
Cholesterol 18mg	6%
Sodium 65mg	3%
Total Carbohydrate 15g	5%
Dietary Fiber 0g	2%
Sugars 4g	

This ice cream with “no sugar added” has 15 grams of total carbohydrate and 5 grams of fat in a ½ cup serving.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1/2 cup (67 g)
Servings per Container 4

Amount Per Serving	
Calories	Calories from Fat
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 8g	12%
Saturated Fat 6g	30%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 25mg	8%
Sodium 65mg	3%
Total Carbohydrate 16g	5%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 13g	

This regular ice cream has 16 grams of total carbohydrate and 8 grams of fat in a ½ cup serving.