

Reading Labels: If You Really Have to Buy Something Processed

Organic whole foods are now available in packages, cans, and boxes. They tend to be found in whole-foods stores or the health-food section of your grocery store.

Even if food has ingredients you are familiar with, there are times when you may want to avoid certain products in processed or manufactured foods. For example, you will want to be careful not to inadvertently include foods in your diet that aren't allowed on the program.

Be sure to read food labels carefully as you shop for the ingredients you will use while on the program. This will help you make sure to adhere to all the guidelines of *The Blood Sugar Solution* as closely as possible. Be a smart label reader. Labels contain both the ingredients and specific (but not all) nutrition information.

Here are some things of which to be aware.

- **Beware of marketing.** Remember, the front of the label is food marketing at its cleverest. It is designed to seduce you into an emotional purchase and may contain exaggerated claims. Look for high-quality ingredients.
- **Where is the ingredient on the list?** If the real food is at the end of the list and the sugars or salts are at the beginning, beware. The most abundant ingredient is listed first, and then the others are listed in descending order by weight.
- **Beware of ingredients in foods that are not labeled.** Foods that are exempt from labels include foods in very small packages, foods prepared in the store, and foods made by small manufacturers.
- **Look for additives or problem ingredients.** If a food has high-fructose corn syrup or hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils, put it back on the shelf. Search for any “suspect” additives.
- **Look for ingredients that don't agree with you.** Identify food ingredients you are sensitive to or react to, such as gluten, eggs, dairy, tree nuts, or peanuts. Be vigilant about reading labels, as the ingredients mentioned in the previous sentence are often hidden in foods you least suspect. The labeling of some allergens is not always clear. The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 requires food manufacturers to disclose the eight most-common allergens on the labels of packaged food. (See www.celiac.com for lists of gluten-containing foods.)
- **Investigate unfamiliar ingredients.** Use an Internet search engine or other resource to find a credible source for any unfamiliar ingredients on the label before you buy, such as

carmines, Quorn, or diacylglycerol. Credible Internet sources tend to be on government or educational sites ending in “.gov” or “.edu” rather than “.com.”

- **Discover if any “functional food ingredients” are being added to the food** product, such as live active cultures, beta-glucan (a viscous fiber), or plant sterols. Though they may be helpful, more often than not they are “window dressing,” present in small amounts and with minimal value, except to the marketing department of the manufacturer. Examples of this include live active cultures added to high-sugar, high-fat yogurts, or vitamins; “vitamin enriched” yet sugar-laden cereals; and ginkgo-supplemented potato chips. In other words, it’s best to get healthful, functional food ingredients from their whole-food sources rather than as additives to other foods.
- **Would your great-grandmother have served this food?** Finally, before you analyze the numbers, ask yourself if this food could have been served at your great-grandmother’s table. She served only real food.

Understanding the Nutrition Label: Think Low GL and High PI

Glycemic load, or GL, is a measure of how quickly a food enters your bloodstream. Low GL leads to better health. Phytonutrient index, or PI, refers to the amount of colorful plant pigments and compounds in a food that help prevent disease and promote health. High PI also leads to better health. Here are a few tips to maintain a low GL and a high PI.

- **Look at the serving size** and determine if this is your “typical” portion, as labels can be deceiving. For example, a cereal may state “3/4 cup serving,” when your typical portion is 1 1/2 cups. Or worse, it may say “2 servings,” when typically people consume the whole amount in the container or bottle. Have you ever known four people to share one pint of Häagen-Dazs ice cream?
- **Are the calories high GL or low GL?** The total amount of carbohydrates is less important than where they come from. If they are found in foods with a low GL and high PI, they will have a very different effect on your appetite and weight than will foods that are quickly absorbed and have few nutrients and fiber. How do you know which foods have a low GL and high PI? Simple. Choose whole-plant foods, and you can’t lose.
- **Start with fiber.** It is one of the main factors that determines the all-important glycemic load, and it can also give you a clue about the phytonutrient index. Many packaged foods have no fiber. If convenience items such as soups, entrées, or snacks are missing this key fiber factor, leave them on the shelf.
- **Look at total carbohydrates.** Remember that it’s the type of carbs that matters most. If they are from whole-plant foods that contain plenty of fiber or have a low GL, their effect is very different from that of fiberless foods. The same amount of carbohydrates from a can of beans or from a can of Coke affects the body in very different ways.

- **Where are the good fats?** Monounsaturated and omega-3 polyunsaturated fats should dominate this category, with minimal amounts of saturated fat and zero trans fats (present on food labels from 2006 on).

Beware that small amounts of trans fats are *STILL* permitted in packaged foods as long as the food contains less than 0.5 grams per serving. But if you eat that food frequently or eat more than one serving (which is usually the case), you may get a load of trans fats. Therefore, look carefully at the label, even if it says “zero trans fats.” Look for the words “hydrogenated” or “partially hydrogenated.” If you see those words, put the item back on the shelf.

Unfortunately, omega-3 fats are rarely listed on the label. They are part of the polyunsaturated fat family, but they come from the good side of the family (they are anti-inflammatory; bad polyunsaturated or omega-6 fats are inflammatory).

Other processed and refined oils that are not as healthy as polyunsaturated fats also show up in this section of the label, including corn oil and safflower oil.

Now for the “Nutrition Facts” on the Label

There are a number of important “Nutrition Facts” listed on food labels, as well. But make sure you keep your facts straight! Not all the nutritional information on the label is as important as it sounds, and some is more important than certain authorities would have you believe. If you’re going to use these “Nutrition Facts” effectively, you need to understand their true meaning. Keep the following in mind:

- **Cholesterol.** Your liver makes more cholesterol in an hour than you ever eat in a day. More cholesterol is produced in the body from eating sugar than from eating fat. There is little correlation between dietary cholesterol and blood cholesterol, and little reason to worry about this number on food labels. Yes, a surprising fact perhaps to many of you, but true.
- **Protein.** If you eat a variety of whole foods, you won’t have to worry about protein because whole foods such as beans, soy foods, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and lean animal foods contain plenty of protein.
- **Sodium.** If you are sodium sensitive, use this simple guideline: Double the calories to get an accurate estimate of how much sodium should be in the serving (for example, 150 calories per serving should have a maximum of 300 milligrams of sodium per serving). There’s an exception to this rule: very low-calorie foods, such as some vegetables without added salt. Many processed foods have far more sodium than this.

You will need to prepare fresh foods at home to recondition your palate to whole foods naturally low in sodium. The recommended daily intake for the average person is 1,500 milligrams, or less than the amount in one teaspoon of salt (2,400 milligrams). That includes salt added at the table, in cooking at the factory, or in a fast-food kitchen (which

is where most of our salt intake comes from—hidden in the processed and fast foods we consume, such as packaged meats, canned soup, and even cottage cheese!).

We should consume about 10 times more potassium, mostly from plant foods (such as bananas, potatoes, spinach, and almonds), than sodium in our diet, yet we do just the opposite. We eat 10 times as much salt or sodium as potassium from table salt, processed foods, and restaurant foods.

- **Calcium.** Add a zero to the calcium percentage on the label. This equals the milligrams of calcium per serving because the “% Daily Value” for calcium is based on 1,000 milligrams. For example, 2 percent equals 20 milligrams calcium, and 30 percent equals 300 milligrams. Remember that calcium is the only nutrient to which this rule applies.
- **Other nutrients.** B-12, iron, zinc, and other nutrients may have been added to the food product to enhance nutrient levels and will be listed on the label if the product was “fortified.” Many junk foods have vitamins or nutrients added. Beware: They can make you feel fine about eating bad-quality foods, yet they have no real benefit.