

Understanding Food Labels Part I: The Basics

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Food Labels Can Be Confusing...

Let's be honest. Food labels *are* confusing! But that really shouldn't be surprising. Food manufacturers must follow specific regulations, written by Congress and enforced by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Those regulations are found in Title 21 of The Code of Federal Regulations. Subchapter B, titled "FOOD FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION" is a two-volume, 1000+ page set of rules covering virtually every aspect of food production – from what foods can be called "low fat", to how large a serving of maple syrup is, to the records that must be kept every time green beans are canned.

There are many resources available to help consumers understand and use Nutrition Facts Panels. But

the rest of the label contains important information as well. This series of fact sheets will introduce you to the other items found on labels, and help explain some of the more confusing ones.

For More Information:

www.fda.gov/food

- *General information on food labeling for consumers and producers*
- *"Make Your Calories Count" nutrition labeling information for consumers*
- *"Spot the Block" nutrition labeling information for youth*

fnic.nal.usda.gov

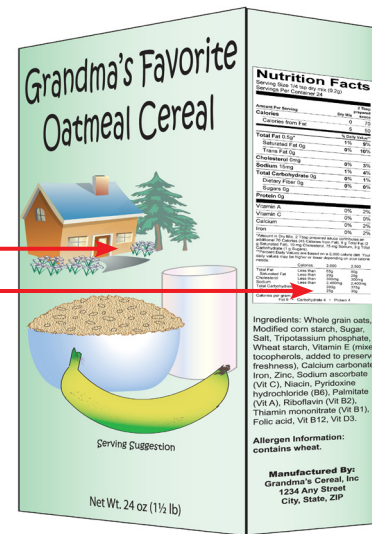
- *"Food Labeling" features a collection of labeling and nutrition resources from the USDA, FDA, and other organizations*

DID YOU KNOW?

The Code of Federal Regulations contains very specific requirements for the format of the Nutrition Facts Panel – including the minimum size of a lowercase "o". But you might not realize that the names of most foods are also highly regulated. Each of the following types of foods has an entire section in the Code of Federal Regulations, describing ingredients and processes that can be used, as well as how the food must be named. To read any of these requirements, an online version of the Code of Federal Regulations can be found by searching the term "ecfr 21".

§ 131 Milk & cream	§ 146 Canned fruit juice	§ 161 Fish & shellfish
§ 133 Cheese	§ 150 Jellies & preserves	§ 163 Cacao products
§ 135 Frozen desserts	§ 152 Fruit Pies	§ 164 Tree nuts & peanuts
§ 136 Bakery products	§ 155 Canned vegetables	§ 165 Beverages
§ 137 Cereal flours	§ 156 Vegetable juices	§ 166 Margarine
§ 139 Macaroni & noodles	§ 158 Frozen vegetables	§ 168 Sweeteners & syrups
§ 145 Canned fruit	§ 160 Eggs & egg products	§ 169 Dressings & flavorings

The FDA divides all food labels into two main sections: the *principal display panel* and the *information panel*.



Required Component	Why It's Required
Items Found on the Principal Display Panel	
Statement of Identity/ Product Name	The FDA has established Statement of Identity definitions for many types of foods (see <i>Did You Know?</i>). This ensures that the name you see on the front of the package is not misleading, and lets consumers know specifically what type of food is in the package.
Net Weight Statement	The net weight statement must be listed in Standard English units (such as pounds, ounces, quarts, or gallons) as well as the equivalent metric units (usually grams or liters).
Items Found on the Information Panel	
Nutrition Facts Panel	Nutrition Facts are required for most foods. Very small companies (those with food sales below \$500,000 per year) do not have to provide nutrition facts, unless they make a health claim about their product. For more information on health claims, see Part III of this series (Fact Sheet FN/FQE/2012-03).
Ingredient Statement	Ingredients must be listed in order by weight. Certain ingredients, like preservatives, must also be followed by a description of why they are present in the food. For more information on ingredients, see Part II of this series (Fact Sheet FN/FQE/2012-02).
Allergen Statement	In 2004, the FDA defined 8 major allergens: Eggs, Fish, Milk, Peanuts, Soy, Shellfish, Tree nuts, and Wheat . Any time one of these is used as an ingredient in a food, it must be declared on the label. It can be listed in the Ingredient Statement (for example, "wheat flour" or "flour (wheat)") or in a separate Allergen Statement.

References:

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. 2010. *Code of Federal Regulations*. Title 21. Subchapter B - Food for Human Consumption.

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