READING FOOD LABELS

Anna’s new family has learned a lot about nutrition. Bill and his children now eat differently. Now they eat more healthful foods. Bill eats more than just meat, potatoes, and desserts. Bill’s son Tim is no longer a picky eater. And, Bill’s teenage daughter Kay is developing a real interest in nutrition. Kay wants to know more.

She wants to know how to read food labels.

Anna and Kay visit the local Cooperative Extension Service Office. They meet Ms. Lara, who works at the Cooperative Extension Service Office. They ask her for help. Ms. Lara talks to them. She gives them information to read. Anna and Kay learn about food labels.

They learn how to read food labels.
WHY DO FOODS HAVE LABELS?

Anna and Kay have noticed that foods, like cookies, bread, and milk, have labels. Foods, like fresh fruits and vegetables, do not have labels. Ms. Lara says that packaged foods must have labels. The labels give buyers accurate information about the foods they purchase. Food labels also help consumers keep food safe. Ms. Lara says that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires labels. The FDA also tests foods to see that the labels are correct.

Ms. Lara says that other foods sometimes have labels, too. For instance, some producers of fresh vegetables and fruits choose to provide labels. These labels also provide nutritional information, such as number of calories or amount of minerals or vitamins. These labels are not on each
fruit or vegetable displays in stores. Ms. Lara tells Anna and Kay to look for such information at their grocery store or ask for help there. Ms. Lara says that some restaurants provide nutrition information about their foods as well.

WHAT DO FOOD LABELS SHOW?

Anna and Kay find out that labels give information about the contents of a package. Labels list the ingredients of the food in the package.

Labels show serving sizes. Labels describe the nutrition of the food. Labels also tell how to use and store the food safely.
Contents

Labels list ingredients when a food has more than one ingredient. These are the items used to make the packaged food. The ingredients are placed in decreasing order of amount. This means that the ingredient that is the largest part of the food is shown first. A package of cookies with a food label that lists enriched flour as the first ingredient should provide more vitamins and minerals than if sugar were listed first.

The label also describes how the food is packaged. A food can be packaged by weight, volume, or count. The label also shows if the food is whole, sliced, or in other pieces.
Anna should always check the ingredients list, especially if a family member has food allergies or wants to avoid certain ingredients for other reasons.

**Nutrition Facts Panel**

Nutrition Facts are shown in a special panel on the back or side of a package. This panel describes the health value of a food by serving size. Many of these facts are given as percent of daily requirements. The percentages are based on a 2000-calorie per day diet. This information helps Anna see how a food fits into daily food choices. Some facts must be included. This means the food's producer has to put that information on the label. The label may include other information. This means the food producer can choose whether or not to put that information on the label.
The format of **nutrition facts** differs for some **foods**, especially for **foods** designed for children under two years. These **nutrition facts** do not show **fat** content or **calories** that come from **fat**. Some parents may think they should limit their young child's **fat** intake. This is not true. **Fat** is important for growth and development for young children.

Anna and Kay look at an example of a **Nutrition Facts Panel** (See Figure 1). They find that **nutrition facts** include **serving** information, **calorie** information, and **nutrient** information.
Serving Information

A serving size is shown as an amount of a food eaten at one time. This serving size is not always the same as the serving size on MyPyramid and may not be the amount of food that a person usually eats as a serving.

Anna learns that she needs to use MyPyramid to help her plan her family’s meals and snacks. Anna also learns that she must always read food labels to be sure that she knows how many servings the food provides. For instance, a label may list a hot dog bun as one serving.

But, a hot dog bun equals two servings, or two ounces, according to the MyPyramid. Another example is pasta. A serving on the MyPyramid is one-half cup, or one ounce. Most people eat at least one cup of pasta. One cup of pasta counts as two servings. Serving sizes have to be listed in both
metric and common household amounts. Household units are the following:

cup, tablespoon, teaspoon, piece, slice, or fraction (such as 1/8 pizza or 1/2 pickle). Ounces are sometimes used if another unit is not appropriate. This section also explains how many total servings are in the container. The Nutrition Facts label in Figure 1 shows Anna that there are four one-half cup servings in the container.

Calorie Information

A label must show the total number of calories and calories from fat. The Nutrition Facts panel in Figure 1 shows Anna and Kay that there are 250 calories in each one cup serving. Of those 250 calories, 110 calories come from fat. If she eats two servings, she doubles the calories and nutrients.
Nutrient Information

Nutrient information is given in metric units (e.g., grams or milligrams) per serving. This information is also given as percent daily value (%DV). These percentages help consumers determine how a food contributes to their diets. The %DV also helps consumers compare nutrients between foods. In general, if the %DV is 5% or below, the food is a low source of that nutrient. If the %DV is 20% or more, the food is a high source of that nutrient.

Most Americans get enough (and sometimes too much) of nutrients such as fats, cholesterol, and sodium. These nutrients are listed first. In most cases, consumers should limit their intake of these nutrients. The total of the percentages for each of these nutrients should be no more than 100% each.
day. Trans fatty acids are not healthy to eat. Anna and Kay should select foods that contain few, if any trans fatty acids.

Next, a label must show the amount of total carbohydrates broken down by dietary fiber and sugars. A label must also include the amount of protein the food contains. These nutrients are not given in terms of %DV.

The diets of most Americans are often lacking in vitamins such as vitamins A and C as well as minerals like calcium and iron. These nutrients are listed last in the Nutrition Facts Panel. Consumers should be careful to get enough of these nutrients each day. Thus, consumers should try to get at least 100% or more of these nutrients each day.
FIGURE 1

A serving size is shown as an amount of a food eaten at one time. This serving size is not always the same as the serving size on the MyPyramid and may not be the amount of food that a person usually eats as a serving. Anna learns that she needs to use MyPyramid to help her plan her family’s meals and snacks. Anna also learns that she must always read food labels to be sure that she knows how many servings the food provides. For instance, a label may list a hot dog bun as one serving. But, a hot dog bun equals two servings according to the MyPyramid. Another example is spaghetti. A serving on the MyPyramid is one-half cup, but most people eat at least one cup of spaghetti. One cup of spaghetti counts as two servings. Serving sizes have to be in both metric and common household amounts. Household units are the following: cup, tablespoon, teaspoon, piece, slice, or fraction (such as 1/8 pizza or 1/2 pickle). Ounces are sometimes used if another unit is not appropriate. This section also explains how many total servings are in the container. This Nutrition Facts label shows Anna that there are two one cup servings in the container.

Sample label for Macaroni & Cheese

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 cup (228g)
Servings Per Container 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount Per Serving</th>
<th>Calories 250</th>
<th>Calories from Fat 110</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Daily Value*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Fat 12g</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturated Fat 3g</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans Fat 3g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol 30mg</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium 470mg</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Carbohydrate 31g</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary Fiber 0g</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugars 5g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protein 5g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin A</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin C</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calories:</th>
<th>2,000</th>
<th>2,500</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Fat</td>
<td>Less than 65g</td>
<td>80g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat Fat</td>
<td>Less than 20g</td>
<td>25g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol</td>
<td>Less than 300mg</td>
<td>300mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>Less than 2,400mg</td>
<td>2,400mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Carbohydrate</td>
<td>300g</td>
<td>375g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary Fiber</td>
<td>25g</td>
<td>30g</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A label shows the total number of calories and calories from fat. The Nutrition Facts panel shows Anna and Kay that there are 250 calories in each one cup serving. Of those 250 calories, 110 calories come from fat. If she eats two servings, she doubles the calories and nutrients. Anna and Kay should select foods that contain few if any trans fatty acids.

Nutrient information is given in metric units (e.g., grams or milligrams per serving). This information is also given as the percent daily value (%DV). These percentages help consumers determine how a food contributes to their diets. The %DV also helps consumers compare nutrients between foods. In general, if the %DV is 5% or below, the food is a low source of that nutrient. If the %DV is 20% or more, the food is a high source of that nutrient. Many Americans get too much of some nutrients such as fats, cholesterol, and sodium. In most cases, consumers should limit their intake of these nutrients. The total of the percentages for each of these nutrients should be no more than 100% daily.

Next, a label must show the amount of total carbohydrates broken down by dietary fiber and sugars. A label must also include the amount of protein the food contains. These nutrients are not given in terms of %DV.

The diets of most Americans are lacking in vitamins such as vitamins A and C as well as minerals like calcium and iron. These nutrients last in the label. Consumers should be careful to get enough of these nutrients each day. Thus, consumers should try to get at least 100% or more of these nutrients each day.
Food Use and Safety

Anna and Kay were already using some information on the label.

They knew that the label gave information about how the food should be used.

They always carefully read directions for preparing and cooking food.

The label also lists how the food should be stored, such as refrigerate after opening. Anna and Kay had seen dates and special numbers on some foods. They found out that these dates show different points of freshness. One date may show when the food was packaged. A special number called a lot number may also be used to show when the food was packaged. Another date shows the last date when the food should be sold.

This date allows time afterward for the food to be stored and used at home. A "best if used by" date is the date of best freshness for a food. The food should
still be good to eat for a few days after this date. Finally, there may be an

expiration date. It may be labeled "do not use after." Anna and Kay

know that this is the last date that the food should be used.

Anna and Kay learn that foods like eggs and fresh meats are

graded and inspected. The label should have a grade shield or inspection

mark. These marks are used to show the quality and freshness of foods.

Anna and Kay know that a label should also show the name and

address of the food's packager. This is useful in case Anna, Kay,

or another consumer has a problem or concern about the food.
HOW DO LABELS DEFINE TERMS?

Anna and Kay learn that food labels must define terms in the same way. These terms help consumers compare food easily and fairly. Anna and Kay make a list that shows common food terms and their meanings (See Table 1).

**TABLE 1: Food Label Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FREE</td>
<td><strong>Food</strong> contains no amount of or a very small amount. For example, calorie-free means fewer than 5 calories per serving. Sugar-free and fat-free mean less than .5 gram (1/2 gram) per serving. Words that mean the same as FREE include WITHOUT, NO, and ZERO. Fat-free milk is termed SKIM or NONFAT milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>Describes foods that can be eaten in large quantities without exceeding the daily value for the nutrient. For example, low-calorie means 40 calories or less per serving. Low-fat means 3 grams or less per serving. Words that mean the same as LOW are LITTLE, FEW, CONTAINS A SMALL AMOUNT OF, and LOW SOURCE OF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEAN</td>
<td>Describes fat content of foods in the meat group. For a serving of 100 grams (3.5 ounces), the food must have less than 10 grams of fat, 4.5 grams or less of saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXTRA-LEAN</td>
<td>Describes fat content of foods in the meat group. For a serving of 100 grams (3.5 ounces), the food must have less than 5 grams of fat, less than 2 grams of saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>Describes foods with 20% or more of the Daily Value for a nutrient per serving. Words that mean the same as HIGH are RICH IN and EXCELLENT SOURCE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOOD SOURCE</td>
<td>Describes foods with 10 to 19% of the Daily Value for a nutrient per serving.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MORE

Describes foods (either nutritionally changed or regular) with 10% or more of the Daily Value for a nutrient per serving. If the food has been nutritionally changed by adding a nutrient, the label may read FORTIFIED, ENRICHED or EXTRA.

REDUCED

Describes a nutritionally changed food that has 25% less of sugar, fat, cholesterol, sodium or calories than the regular version. Reduced-fat milk (2%) contains 5 grams of fat compared to 8 grams of fat in “whole” milk.

LIGHT

Applies to number of calories or amount of fat or sodium (salt) content. When describing fat content, it means that a nutritionally changed food has one-third less calories or one-half less fat or sodium than the regular version. If half or more of the calories in the regular version come from fat, the fat also has to be half or less.

FRESH

Means that a food is raw or not processed. This term can also be used to describe milk or bread products. Terms such as FRESH FROZEN, FROZEN FRESH, and FRESHLY FROZEN can be used if a food has been quickly frozen while still fresh.

USING INFORMATION ON FOOD LABELS

Anna and Kay now know how to use information on food labels.

They know how to identify important ingredients in a package. They know how to read a nutrition facts panel. They know how to use and store foods safely.

They understand terms used on a package. Kay will use this information to make healthful food choices. Anna will use this information to
compare foods when she shops. Anna will also use this to provide

healthful snacks for her family and serve more healthful meals on a budget.