

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Understanding the Ingredient List on Labels for Good Nutrition

Nutrition and Meal Management

Purpose: This handout provides basic factors for reading an ingredient list on a Nutrition Facts label.

Did you know there are thousands of ingredients used to make foods? The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires that all packaged foods include ingredient lists so that shoppers can make more informed purchases.

In combination with the ingredient list, the front label and the Nutrition Facts label provide a clear image of what is in the package. This information informs consumers of what they are buying and allows them to make better choices. Using this information is also helpful in identifying food items for dietary preferences or food allergies.

Where to Locate the List of Ingredients

Food manufacturers must list all food ingredients on the product label as an ingredient statement. This list is typically on the side or the back of a food package.

This is what an ingredient list might look like:

INGREDIENTS: WHOLE WHEAT PASTA (WATER, WHOLE WHEAT FLOUR), WATER, WHEAT GLUTEN, SUGAR, YEAST, OATS CONTAINS 2% OR LESS OF: BUTTER (CREAM, SALT), MODIFIED CORNSTARCH, SOY LECITHIN, WHEY.

CONTAINS: WHEAT, SOY, AND MILK

How to Read an Ingredient List

Ingredients are listed in order by weight. The ingredient with the largest amount is listed first, and the ingredient that makes up the least amount of the product is listed last. In the ingredient list above, whole wheat pasta has the highest amount, while whey has the least.

An ingredient list can provide detailed information about what is in the food. For example, a product may have a marketing claim on the front of the package but when compared with the ingredient list, the claim may have a different meaning than what the consumer assumed. For example, the package may list “made with real fruit.” If fruit is not among the first few ingredients, it may have as little as 1% of fruit.

How to Read an Ingredient List to Purchase an Item for Good Nutrition

The ingredient list can provide consumers with information to determine if a product is a healthy choice. By using the percent daily values (% DV), the ingredient label can be used to ensure that enough nutrients are being consumed throughout the day. It is also helpful in determining the nutrient density of foods, calories, and serving sizes. It provides information to help limit foods that are high in sodium, fats, and sugars.

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How to Read an Ingredient List to Avoid Food

The ingredient list can also provide important information about when an ingredient should be avoided, such as a food allergy or a dietary preference. If a child has a peanut allergy, any nut-related information will be included in the ingredient list. For both preferences and allergies, this list is a very important way to know whether the food is a good choice.

The ingredient list is an extremely important part of a food package. Knowing how to use this list when purchasing items for good nutrition and to avoid ingredients will result in better-informed choices for CACFP settings.

References

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