

Make Smart Choices: Read Food Labels

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On January 31, 2011 the Agriculture Secretary from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) jointly issued the 7th edition of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA).

Overall, this ninety five page read contains six chapters, twenty three new key nutritional recommendations, plus six additional tips for specific populations and appendices. If practiced, these guidelines help to facilitate individual behavior change which in turn will promote health, reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity, ultimately making people healthier now and in the future.

I found the new DGA to be an interesting read. Their suggestions are quick, simple and action oriented.

However, the most significant statement can be found on the first page of the Executive Summary.

Eating and Physical activity patterns that are focused on consuming fewer calories, making informed food choices, and being physically active can help people attain and maintain a healthy weight, reduce their risk of chronic disease and promote overall healthy.

How? Simple! Learn to use *the* Nutrition Facts Label to track calories, nutrients and ingredients plus, add in a bit of physical activity. Simply learning to read a Nutrition Facts Label can help many Americans avoid the heavy toll of diet-related chronic diseases and learn about the food they are *eating* and *drinking*.

Take chapter three for instance: Foods and Food components to *reduce*. One such recommendation: Limit the consumption of foods that contain:

- Refined grains
- Solid fats
- Added sugar
- Sodium

A nutrition facts label provides information about the:

- Number of servings that are in an entire package, can or bag
- Number of calories that are in a serving of food
- Amount of certain nutrients (fat, carbohydrates, protein)
- Percent Daily Values for nutrients that should be limited (saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and sodium)
- Footnotes explaining how the *percent of daily value* is based (on a 2,000 or 2,500 calorie diet)
- Ingredient list

To make food labels work for you ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you know what you are eating? Ingredients are listed in order from highest to lowest quantity, according to their weight. *Are you paying for nutrient dense foods?*
- Do you know how many calories and servings you are eating? Many packages contain multiple servings. This multiplies the calories consumed too.
- Do you know what the words and phrases used on the label mean? Become familiar with industry terms. Take the phrase sodium-free for instance. Manufacturers can make claims of sodium-free yet by

definition it means the product contains less than 5 mg of salt per serving. If you eat multiple servings your consumption of sodium is no longer insignificant.

With practice, you'll be able to quickly inspect a food label and learn how the food fits into your healthy eating plan.

Improved eating and physical activity habits are good for all of us. Proper dietary habits can promote health and reduce risk for major chronic diseases.

It is the mission of both the USDA and the DHHS to improve the health of all Americans. Each of us should do our part to make health a driving force in making food decisions. Adopt lifelong healthy eating, physical activity and weight management behaviors. Start by reading a label.

For additional information see:

<http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/dietaryguidelines.htm>

<http://www.healthfinder.gov/>

<http://womenshealth.gov/Tools/foodlabeltxt.cfm> (How to read a food label)

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