



Nutrition Labelling Education: Toolkit for Educators

Questions and Answers

1 What are the new regulations?

The new regulations present the requirements for three different types of nutrition information on food labels.

- *Nutrition labelling*: the regulations make the Nutrition Fact table mandatory on prepackaged foods with some exemptions. The Nutrition Facts table will have a consistent format and always provide information on Calories and on the following 13 nutrients: fat, saturated fat, *trans* fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrate, fibre, sugars, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron.
- *Nutrient content claims*: the regulations update the past requirements for nutrient content claims (e.g., low in saturated fat, low sodium) based on current science and also introduce new claims (e.g., free of *trans* fat).
- *Diet-related health claims*: the regulations permit four new claims for foods that are suitable for diets that reduce risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, some types of cancer, and osteoporosis as well as update the requirements for noncariogenic claims.

2 How were the regulations developed?

The new regulations were developed through extensive consultation with consumers, health interest groups and the food industry. An external Advisory Committee was appointed to help in the development of the nutrition labelling policy. We looked at the U.S. model as well, particularly at their prize-winning format.

3 How do the regulations differ from what existed in the past?

- Prior to these new regulations, nutrition labelling was optional with a few exceptions. The format of the table (the way it looked) was not consistent, and if nutrition labelling was provided, information was given on only a few nutrients.
- Not all nutrient content claims were regulated, and the criteria for some of the existing claims did not reflect the latest science.
- Diet-related health claims were not allowed in Canada before these new regulations.
- All of the changes to nutrition labelling and claims aim to reflect new knowledge in science and health and to better serve consumers' interests and health needs.

4 When will consumers see the new Nutrition Facts table on food labels?

Manufacturers will be given up to three years after the regulations are in place (starting January 2003) to revise the labels on their products. Small businesses will be allowed five years to come into compliance.

However, any manufacturer who wants to use one of the new nutrition claims (nutrient content claims or diet-related health claims) will have to display the new Nutrition Facts table.



5 Are there any exemptions to mandatory nutrition labelling?

The Nutrition Facts table appears on most prepackaged foods. Since it is difficult to provide labelling for prepackaged foods under certain conditions, exemptions are allowed for foods such as:

- Fresh fruit and vegetables
- Raw meat and poultry (except when ground), and raw fish and seafood
- Food products that are prepared from ingredients or from pre-mixes at the place where they are sold
Examples are bakery items, sausages made at retail
- Products with insignificant amounts of all 13 core nutrients in a normal serving
Examples are coffee beans, tea leaves, herbs and spices, and food colours
- Alcoholic beverages
- Foods sold at road-side stands, craft shows, flea markets, fairs, farmers' markets and sugar bushes by the same person who made them
- Small amounts of food that have been packaged at the retail establishment and sold on site
- Individual servings of food intended for immediate consumption that have not been subjected to a process to extend their shelf-life
Examples are packaged sandwiches sold in canteens, vending machines or refrigerated counters

6 Do exempted foods ever have Nutrition Facts information?

Exempted foods may still have Nutrition Facts on the label. A food will no longer be exempt if a nutrition claim is made, if vitamins or minerals have been added, or if sweeteners, such as aspartame, have been added.

Full exemption

These foods will never lose their exempt status due to packaging constraints:

- Single portions of food served with meals or snacks, such as condiments
- Single pieces of candy that are packaged and sold individually
- Milk and cream sold in refillable glass bottles

7 Will there be nutrition information for foods that are not prepackaged?

Foods that are not prepackaged will not have a Nutrition Facts table. This includes foods that are served or sold in restaurants, cafeterias, take-outs; meats and cheeses sold at a deli counter; and many fresh fruit and vegetables.

However, consumers should be encouraged to look for and request nutrition information. For example, information binders on the nutritional value of vegetables and fruit may be found near produce sections in grocery stores, and reference booklets on the nutrient content of products are sometimes available, on request, at restaurants.

8 Why were these 13 nutrients selected to always appear on food labels?

The nutrients chosen are those that consumers, health professionals and scientists consider important to the health of Canadians.

9 What is *trans* fat?

Trans fat is derived from a chemical process known as “partial hydrogenation”, which is the process of converting liquid oils to a semi-solid form.

Trans fat, like saturated fat, has been shown to raise serum LDL-cholesterol levels. LDL-cholesterol is a risk factor for coronary heart disease.

Most Canadians should reduce their intake of saturated and *trans* fats because they increase risk factors for heart disease.



10 Is sodium the same thing as salt?

Sodium (Na) is one of the chemical elements found in table salt. The chemical name for table salt is sodium chloride (NaCl). Salt is a common ingredient in processed and prepared foods, such as canned soups and processed meats. Sodium, without chloride, may also be added to foods through additives such as disodium phosphate, sodium nitrate, or sodium gluconate. Some foods, such as milk, contain sodium naturally. Sodium can contribute to increasing the risk for high blood pressure.

11 Can other nutrients be declared in the Nutrition Facts table?

Yes, in addition to the mandatory nutrients, the Nutrition Facts table may contain information on Calories from fat, Calories from saturated and *trans* fats, polyunsaturated fat, omega-6 and omega-3 polyunsaturated fat, monounsaturated fat, potassium, soluble and insoluble fibre, sugar alcohol, starch and the following vitamins and minerals: vitamin D, vitamin E, vitamin K, thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, vitamin B6, folate, vitamin B12, biotin, pantothenic acid, phosphorus, iodide, magnesium, zinc, selenium, copper, manganese, chromium, molybdenum, and chloride.

Nutrients not in this list and other food constituents may be declared outside the Nutrition Facts table.

12 Why are the serving sizes listed on Nutrition Facts not the same as those on Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating?

The serving size listed in the Nutrition Facts table is there as a reference. It identifies a specific amount of food for the purpose of declaring the Calorie and nutrient content. It can be compared to the amount eaten or the amount listed on other similar products. The serving size listed in Nutrition Facts is an amount that is often consumed at one sitting.

The serving sizes on the Food Guide are also there as a reference, so that the amount eaten can be compared with the recommended pattern of eating. When setting the serving sizes for the Food Guide, the amount of food typically consumed at one sitting was only one of the factors that was considered; another factor that was considered was to encourage smaller portions.

13 What is % Daily Value, and how is it calculated?

The % Daily Value is a simple benchmark for evaluating the nutrient content of foods quickly and easily. The % Daily Value can be used to determine whether there is a lot or a little of a nutrient in a serving of the food.

The Daily Values are based on recommendations for a healthy diet. For example, it has generally been recommended that a healthy diet should not provide more than 30% of its Calories as fat. For a 2000-Calorie diet, this means 65 g of fat. This amount of fat is the basis for the Daily Value and the fat content in a serving of food is expressed as a percentage of 65 g.

Therefore, a product with 10 g of fat would have a % Daily Value of 15%

$$15\% = (10 \text{ g} \div 65 \text{ g}) \times 100$$

14 You say that % DV indicates whether there is a little or a lot of a nutrient. What is "a little"? What is "a lot"?

What exactly is "a lot" or "a little" varies for individuals and for nutrients. Even without being told what is high (a lot) or what is low (a little) for each nutrient, Canadians can use % DV to quickly assess if the nutrients they are trying to increase have higher percentages, and those that they are trying to decrease have lower percentages.

More specific criteria are available for nutrition claims, such as "low" in a nutrient or "high" in a nutrient. These criteria vary depending on the nutrient. For example:

- A food that has a % DV of 5% or less for fat, sodium or cholesterol would be low in these three nutrients
- A food that has a % DV of 10% or less for saturated + *trans* fats would be low in these two nutrients
- A food that has a % DV of 15% or more for calcium, vitamin A or fibre would be high in these three nutrients





15 Why are vitamins and minerals only expressed as a percentage of a Daily Value?

It is easier for consumers to interpret the vitamin and mineral quantities within a food as a percentage of a Daily Value, rather than needing to understand various units like RE or µg.

16 Why is there no % Daily Value for some nutrients?

The % Daily Values are based on dietary guidance for healthy populations. In the case of sugars, there is no recognized guideline on the amount that should be consumed by healthy populations. For protein, intakes are generally adequate and are not a health concern for Canadians who have access to a mixed diet. In the case of cholesterol, the % Daily Value is optional because while it is a risk factor for heart disease, a reduction in saturated fat, which is found in meat and dairy products, will be accompanied by a reduction in cholesterol intake. Because of this, education programs in Canada have not focussed on reducing dietary cholesterol.

17 Do consumers need to adjust the % Daily Values depending on their own caloric intake or individual nutrient needs?

All consumers can use the % Daily Value as a general guide, whether they eat more or less than 2000 Calories each day, or even know how many Calories they consume.

Only the Daily Values for carbohydrates, total fat, and saturated + *trans* fats are based on a 2000-Calorie diet. The recommendations for the other nutrients are not related to caloric intake, and therefore the Daily Values for these nutrients apply to most people, regardless of their caloric intake.

The actual amounts (g or mg) may be used more by those with specific dietary needs.

18 What kind of health claims are allowed?

Health claims are a type of nutrition claim. Health claims about the following diet/health relationships are permitted:

- A diet low in saturated and trans fat reduces risk of heart disease
- A diet with adequate calcium and vitamin D, and regular physical activity, reduces risk of osteoporosis
- A diet rich in vegetables and fruit reduces risk of some types of cancer
- A diet low in sodium and high in potassium reduces risk of high blood pressure

19 Why are there claims on some products and not on other, similar products?

There are nutrition claims on some products, but not on others because nutrition claims are optional. Manufacturers can choose whether or not to put a nutrition claim on their product if it meets the criteria set in the regulations.

20 Can consumers rely on nutrition claims?

Nutrition claims must meet specific government regulations. Manufacturers can only use a specific nutrition claim if their product meets the criteria in the regulations. The approved nutrition claims may highlight a nutritional feature of a food or a relationship between diet and disease.

New requirements for existing nutrition claims as well as new claims are based on current science and are consistent with dietary recommendations and public health needs so that they are credible and useful for consumers and health professionals.

21 How will the regulations be enforced?

The regulations will be enforced by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. They will respond to enquiries related to compliance and enforcement activities.

22 How do I use the nutrition information on food labels in a healthy eating context?

For educators, nutrition labelling provides the opportunity to highlight and to revitalize healthy eating programs and messages.

Linking the label information to food guide messages can help focus attention on healthy eating, as a whole. The nutrition information on food labels helps consumers compare products more easily, determine the nutritional value of foods and better manage special diets. Nutrition labelling is a practical tool that helps Canadians make informed food choices.

