



How to Use the Nutrition Facts Panel to Choose the Right Fuel

For collegiate athletes, learning how to choose quality fuel can be tricky. Athletes often need more calories, and therefore more food, than others. What's more, busy class and training schedules leave little time to plan, shop, and prepare meals. Coaches and trainers can help equip athletes with the right knowledge to select high-quality foods and build meals for optimal performance, starting with how to use food labels.

The transition from dining hall to apartment kitchen is drastic. Anyone can fall victim to fancy marketing and misleading claims about food. The key is to tune out the hype and focus on the facts.

The Nutrition Facts (see Figure 1) and Ingredient List are powerful tools available to student athletes. Nutrition Facts are required on most prepared and packaged foods, such as breads, cereals, canned and frozen foods, snacks, desserts, and drinks.¹ Labeling for raw fruits, vegetables, and fish is voluntary.¹ The Ingredient List reveals the sources of various nutrients. For example, frozen vegetables or fruits will contain some carbohydrate, but the Ingredient List will reveal added sugars. Ingredients are listed in descending order of predominance by weight.

For athletes, the key components of the Nutrition Facts label to focus on are: serving size; servings per container; calories; quantity in grams (g) for total fat, types of fat, carbohydrate, and protein; quantity in milligrams (mg) for sodium; and percent Daily Value (%DV) for vitamins and other minerals of interest. The athlete must know his or her unique needs in order to select the right foods.

“Serving size” is the standard portion size for the food. Calories and nutrients are listed for one serving, so comparing across brands is made easier.² “Servings per container” is the number of servings in the entire package.² Even if the package appears to be a single serving, it may contain two or three. A little math will inform athletes about what they are getting in more than one serving, which may be necessary to meet energy requirements.

Most athletes understand what calories are, but may not realize where they come from. The Nutrition Facts label reports fat, carbohydrate, and protein. Focus on the quantity (g), as % DV for macronutrients will rarely match up with their unique needs. For fats, the goal is to choose foods lower in saturated and *trans* fats. Unsaturated fats are healthful, although not always listed specifically.

Carbohydrate is the foundation of an athletes' meal plan. The type of carbohydrate is just as important as the amount. Total carbohydrate on the Nutrition Facts label includes starches, complex carbohydrates, dietary fibers, sugars, and non-digestible carbohydrates. Listed under total carbohydrate are the quantities of fiber and sugar. The Nutrition Facts label does not distinguish between naturally occurring and added sugars. Many healthful foods, such as milk and fruit, contain naturally occurring sugar. One cup of milk contains 12 grams of lactose, and an orange about 15 g of fructose. Added sugars (sugar, high fructose corn syrup, honey, etc) will be listed in the Ingredient List. These ingredients should

be consumed in moderation, although two or more forms of sugar in a sports drink is desirable. (Refer to the *Nutrient Timing* fact sheet to learn the best time to eat different types of carbohydrate.)

The % DV shows the degree to which a serving of the food or drink meets daily needs, which is useful for athletes that need to focus on getting more of a certain nutrient. For example, if an athlete is iron deficient and was instructed to eat more iron-rich foods, he or she should look for foods that are good (more than 10% DV) or excellent sources (more than 20% DV). In general, a food with 5% DV or less is low, while a food that has 20% DV or more is high in that nutrient.²

Athletes should also pay attention to the amount of sodium in foods. Although most foods naturally contain small amounts of sodium, processed foods tend to be a significant source in the American diet. The % DV for sodium does not necessarily apply to athletes, so they should focus on quantity (mg).² Sodium needs will change throughout the training cycle, therefore at different times higher sodium foods may actually be recommended. On the other hand, an athlete with high blood pressure will need to carefully control when and how much sodium is consumed.

Athletes should refer to the factsheet, *How to Use the Nutrition Facts Label* for specific tips on using the food label to select foods.

Author

Written by SCAN Registered Dietitians (RDs). For more information on reading a food label or customizing a nutrition plan, consult a RD who specializes in sports, particularly a Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD). Find a SCAN RD at www.scandpg.org.

References

1. Food and Drug Administration. "Food Labeling and Nutrition Overview."
<http://www.fda.gov/Food/LabelingNutrition/default.htm>.
2. Food and Drug Administration. "How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label."
<http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/NFLPM/ucm274593.htm>.

Figure 1. Nutrition Facts label

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1/2 cup (about 82g)	
Servings Per Container 8	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 200	Calories from Fat 130
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 14g	22%
Saturated Fat 9g	45%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 55mg	18%
Sodium 40mg	2%
Total Carbohydrate 17g	6%
Dietary Fiber 1g	4%
Sugars 14g	
Protein 3g	
Vitamin A 10%	• Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 10%	• Iron 6%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:	
	Calories: 2,000 2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g 80g
Saturated Fat	Less than 20g 25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300 mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g
Calories per gram:	
Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4	