

Nutrient Claims on Food Labels

Are you familiar with the label language on food products in the grocery store?

- The label on a can of pears says there is "no added sugar."
- The words on a milk carton boast that it is "high in calcium."
- Certain breakfast cereals claim to be "high in fiber."
- "Lite" salad dressing and cookies with "fewer calories" also catch your eye.

These are all nutrient content claims. The optional information in a nutrient claim tells you that a food contains desirable levels of certain nutrients or alerts you to avoid a food that contains a certain nutrient that is detrimental to your health.

What is a Nutrient Claim?

This is a claim concerning a product's nutritive value. It describes the content of a food, including the amount of nutrients, calories, cholesterol or fiber, but not in exact amounts. Usually on the front of the food label, the nutrient claim provides a quick comparison between similar products.

Have you ever wondered if you can believe the nutrient claims on food labels? Yes, you can. Under the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) of 1990, the government set strict rules and definitions that a product must meet to make a nutrient claim or a health claim. If a product meets these strict criteria, the manufacturer can display certain approved claims about the food.

Approved Terms: By knowing the definitions of terms used on food labels, you will be able to choose foods wisely. The NLEA permits the use of label claims that describe the level of a nutrient in a

food (e.g. nutrient content claims). Nutrient content claims describe the level of a nutrient or dietary substance in the product, using terms such as free, high, and low, or they compare the level of a nutrient in a food to that of another food, using terms such as more, reduced, and lite. Refer to the table, "Definitions of Nutrient Content Claims," on the next page to learn what these claims mean.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires that a nutrient content claim on a food package be based on how much of the food most people usually eat or drink. This is called the reference amount. Serving size and reference amount are usually the same.

Always check the label, because sometimes serving size and reference amount are different. For example, a serving size of low calorie soda is 12 fl. oz., but the low calorie claim on the label is based on a reference amount of 8 fl. oz. Therefore, the manufacturer must include this statement: "40 calories or less per 240 milliliters (8 fl. oz.)."

Daily Values: Most nutrient claims apply to nutrients that have an established Daily Value (DV), which is the basis for nutrient claims such as a food is "low" in sodium or a "good source" of fiber. Use the % DV to compare a food with a nutrient claim to a similar food without a claim.

A food which provides 10% or more of the Daily Value for a nutrient per serving is a good source, while one providing 20% is considered "high in" the nutrient. Choose several servings of foods that are "high in" or "good sources" of hard-to-get nutrients like calcium. Recommended amounts are the minimums you should consume daily.

Any food containing less than 5% of a Daily Value provides only a small amount of that nutrient. Aim for 100% or less of the Daily Value for nutrients that should be limited, such as total fat, saturated

fat, cholesterol and sodium. For more information on % DVs, refer to [HGIC 4057, *Determining Nutritional Value of Foods*](#).

Definitions of Nutrient Content Claims

Nutrient Content Claim	What the Claim Means Per Serving
High (rich in, excellent source)	20% or more of the Daily Value
Good	10% to 19% of the Daily Value
More	Contains at least 10% more of the Daily Value for vitamins, minerals, protein, dietary fiber, or potassium.*
Light	Has at least 1/3 fewer calories or 50% less fat.* If more than half the calories are from fat, fat content must be reduced by 50% or more.
Less or fewer	Has 25% less of a nutrient or of calories
Calorie Claims	
Calorie free	Less than 5 calories
Low calorie	40 calories or less
Reduced calories	At least 25% fewer calories*
Sugar Claims	
Sugar free	Less than 0.5 gram sugars
Reduced sugar	At least 25% less sugar*
Fiber Claims (If food is not low in total fat, the label must state total fat in conjunction with the fiber claims.)	
High fiber	5 grams or more
Good source of fiber	2.5 grams to 4.9 grams
More or added fiber	At least 2.5 grams more*
Sodium Claims	
Sodium free or salt free	Less than 5 milligrams sodium
Very low sodium	35 milligrams of sodium or less
Low sodium	140 milligrams of sodium or less
Reduced sodium	At least 25% less sodium*
Light in sodium	At least 50% less sodium
Salt free	Less than 5 milligrams sodium
Fat Claims	
Fat free	Less than 0.5 gram fat
Low fat	3 grams or less total fat
Reduced fat	At least 25% less fat than the regular version
Saturated Fat Claims	
Saturated fat free	Less than 0.5 gram saturated fat and less than 0.5 gram trans fatty acids
Low in saturated fat	1 gram or less saturated fat & no more than 15% calories from saturated fat
Reduced saturated fat	At least 25% less saturated fat* and reduced by more than 1 gram fat
Note: Trans fat has no FDA-defined nutrient content claims.	
Cholesterol Claims	
Cholesterol free	Less than 2 milligrams cholesterol and 2 grams or less saturated fat
Low cholesterol	20 milligrams or less cholesterol and 2 grams or less saturated fat
Reduced cholesterol	At least 25% less cholesterol and 2 grams or less saturated fat*
Lean Claims	
Lean	Contains less than 10 grams total fat, 4.5 grams or less saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams cholesterol
Extra lean	Contains less than 5 grams total fat, less than 2 grams saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams cholesterol
*compared to the reference, or regular, food this would replace	

All of these terms give a general idea of a food's nutrient content. For the exact amount of nutrients and calories in one serving, read the Nutrition Facts, which is usually on the side or back of the package.

Light: The term "light" can also be used to describe texture and color, if the label explains the intent (e.g. "light brown sugar" and "light and fluffy").

Healthy: A "healthy" food is low in fat and saturated fat and contains limited amounts of cholesterol (60 mg or less per serving) and sodium (480 mg or less per serving). If it is a single-item food, it also must follow the "10-percent" rule. This means that it provides at least 10% of the DV per serving of at least one of these: vitamins A or C, iron, calcium, protein and fiber.

Certain fresh, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables and certain cereal-grain products are exceptions to this rule. They can be labeled "healthy" even if they don't have at least 10% DV per serving of the above nutrients.

Meal-type products (e.g. frozen entrees and multi-course frozen dinners) must provide 10% DV of two or three of these: vitamins A or C, iron, calcium, protein or fiber, as well as meet the other criteria. Sodium content cannot exceed 360 mg per serving for individual foods and 480 mg per serving for meal-type products.

If a food is labeled "healthy" or makes a health claim, it can't contain any nutrient that increases risk for disease. It must contain no more than 20% of the DV per serving of: total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, or sodium. Therefore, low-fat and fat-free milks qualify to make the calcium and osteoporosis claim, yet whole milk contains too much saturated fat to make that claim.

Other Definitions

Percent Fat Free: A product with this claim must be low-fat or fat-free, and the claim must show the amount of fat present in 100 grams of the food. If a food contains 2.5 grams of fat per 50 grams, for example, the claim must be "95% fat free."

Implied: These claims are prohibited if they wrongfully imply that there is, or is not, a meaningful level of a nutrient in a food. For

example, "made with oat bran" is not allowed unless the product contains enough oat bran to meet the definition for "good source" of fiber. However, a claim that a product contains "no tropical oils" is allowed, but only on foods that are "low" in saturated fat. Why? Consumers have come to equate tropical oils with high saturated fat.

Meals & Main Dishes: A meal or main dish that claims to be "free" of a nutrient (e.g. cholesterol or sodium) must meet the same requirements as those for individual foods. The following claims can be used under special circumstances:

Low calorie means the meal or main dish contains 120 calories or less per 100 g.

Low sodium meals and main dishes have 140 mg or less sodium per 100 g.

Low cholesterol means the food contains 20 mg cholesterol or less per 100 g and no more than 2 g saturated fat.

Light meals and main dishes are low-fat or low-calorie.

Standardized Foods: Any nutrient content claim (e.g. "reduced fat," "low calorie") can be used in conjunction with a standardized term, as long as the new product:

- has been specifically formulated to meet FDA's criteria for that claim
- is not nutritionally inferior to the traditional standardized food
- complies with certain compositional requirements set by FDA

A new product that makes a claim must have performance characteristics similar to the referenced traditional standardized food. If it does not and the product's use is limited, then the label must inform consumers of the differences (e.g. "not recommended for baking").

Health Claims

Health claims, which must be authorized by FDA, describe a relationship between a nutrient or food and a disease or health-related condition. If a claim names a specific disease risk, there is substantial scientific evidence that, in the context of a healthy

diet, the food product may help protect against the disease. A few examples are: fruits and vegetables and a reduced risk of cancer; calcium and a lower risk of osteoporosis; fat and a greater risk of cancer; sodium and a greater risk of high blood pressure.

Health claims must be written so that consumers can understand the nutrient's importance in the daily diet and the relationship between the nutrient and the disease. An example is: "While many factors affect heart disease, diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of this disease."

Health claims made in magazine and television advertisements are not regulated by FDA.

Claims on Functional Foods

If food products meet strict government rules and definitions, then their labels can display certain nutrient or health claims. On the other hand, the labels of functional foods and other products claiming to be dietary supplements are largely unregulated. This allows them to make misleading, unsubstantiated (but legal) claims.

A nutrient or health claim and a claim on functional food may look similar, but you must learn the difference. A health claim is well-researched, reliable and approved by FDA (e.g. "may reduce the risk of heart disease").

Although deceptively similar, a structure/function claim is not supported by scientific evidence, is far less regulated, and must be worded so that it does not mention a specific disease (e.g. "promotes a healthy heart," "builds strong bones," improves memory," "slows aging," or "provides a variety of health benefits").

The following type of FDA disclaimer must be included on the label: "This statement has not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, mitigate, cure or prevent any disease."

For more information on food labeling request: [HGIC 4056, *Reading the New Food Labels*](#); [HGIC 4057, *Determining Nutritional Value of Foods*](#); [HGIC 4058, *Food Labels: Fat & Cholesterol*](#); [HGIC 4059, *Food Labels: Carbohydrates*](#); [HGIC 4060, *Serving Sizes for Special Diets*](#); and [HGIC 4062, *Nutrient Density*](#).

Sources:

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