Love your work, Alice!

My question: I have two children who have really gotten into reading the FDA-required "Nutrition Facts" label that appears on packaged food. In particular, my son (age seven) now continually reads the labels and tries to decide "which is healthier?" The problem? The nutrition label is only on things that have packages, which are more likely to be processed foods. Is there a website or other resource that gives you the nutrition facts label for generic (and healthier) things like broccoli, watermelon, apples, dried organic lentils sold in bulk, and the like? I've searched around, but can only find this information in disparate places, and nothing as nifty-looking as that label!!

Thanks, Alice!

? Mom trying to offer healthy choices, but having some technical difficulties

Answer

Dear Mom trying to offer healthy choices, but having some technical difficulties,

To think, while some children beg for the latest neon-colored sugar cereal to hit the shelves, your two children are tallying fiber grams. Nice job fostering their interest in nutrition. Being familiar with the benefits of, and encouraging, healthy lifestyle behaviors are key to lowering the risk of chronic diseases later in life, such as heart disease and cancer.

As you are aware, the "Nutrition Facts" label is a helpful tool for understanding what each food contributes to daily nutrient intake. These labels provide the amount of carbohydrates, fat, protein, as well as percent daily values for a number of nutrients. Percent Daily Values (DV) are based on a 2000-calorie eating plan, which can be confusing, because that's more calories than some folks may need. For an in-depth explanation about this or other food label content issues, check the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [2], or the Kidshealth.org Figuring Out Food Labels page [3] for kid-friendly explanations. It's also worth noting that in the near future (starting in 2018), there will be some updates to the Nutrition Facts labels you see. Many of the changes reflect a newer understanding of eating trends and nutrient needs of Americans (to know what to look out for, take a look at the FDA?s overview of the finalized label changes [4]).
At this time though, curious consumers will not find "Nutrition Fact" labels on all foods, even if foods have packaging. Some specific exceptions to food labeling requirements include:

- Ready-to-eat food that is not for immediate consumption but is prepared primarily on site, for example, bakery, deli, and candy store items
- Food shipped in bulk, as long as it is not for sale in that form to consumers
- Medical foods, such as those used to address the nutritional needs of people with certain diseases
- Plain, unsweetened coffee and tea, some spices, and other foods that contain insignificant amounts of nutrients

Though you might not see nutrient labels on fresh foods, the information needs to be nearby. The FDA created a voluntary program to promote retailer labeling of the top 20 most commonly sold fruits, vegetables, and fish. The nutrient information needs to be available in some form, which may be found in a brochure, leaflet, notebook, stickers, or even video format, located in the appropriate grocery department. Required nutritional information for the raw, edible parts of fresh fruits and veggies, as well as cooked fish (even though it's sold raw) include the following:

- Name of the fruit, vegetable, or fish
- Serving size
- Calories per serving
- Amount of protein, carbohydrates, fat, and sodium per serving
- Percent of the Daily Value (DV) for iron, calcium, and vitamins A and C per serving

You can also find this and more information right at your fingertips! Nutrient information for thousands foods from alfalfa sprouts to zucchini can be accessed at the click of a button by searching the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Nutrient Database. A simple keyword search and portion size specification will yield the complete nutrient profile of your food.

Hopefully these resources will help make your technical difficulties with nutrition labels a thing of the past!

Alice!

Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity
Food Choices & Health
Optimal Nutrition
Healthy Eating

Related questions
Calories: Does it matter where they come from?
Food guidelines? How much is a serving?
Ideal caloric intake?

Resources
Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside)