

Food Labels: Healthy Habits on the Flip Side

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Picture a shopper scanning a row of cereal boxes. She zeroes in on a bright box featuring a smiling cartoon character – delicious and fun, it seems! What she may not know, though, is that the cereal is chock-full of sugar – which, consumed in high quantities, can lead to health complications like diabetes, hypertension and obesity.

How can the shopper figure out if the cereal is the healthiest choice? The answer is on the flip side: turn the cereal box over to check out the food's Nutrition Facts, which outline the food's nutritional story, including the number of ingredients, recommended serving size, and the amount of sodium and dietary fiber.

Information about how to make healthy food choices, including how to interpret food labels, is what the Food Bank shares at nutrition workshops for our community-based member programs and with participants in CookShop, our federally funded nutrition education program. Below are some of the label-reading tips we suggest:

- Be aware of the serving size – even if that bottle of soda or bag of chips from the vending machine looks like one serving, it may actually be two. If so, you'll need to double all of the label values to see the actual amount of nutrients you are taking in. (Better yet, Change One Thing and go for a bottle of water or piece of fruit instead!)
- Check out the first five items listed under "Ingredients." These "First Five" are the ones included in the largest amounts. Watch out for added sugars, salt and any ingredients you have trouble pronouncing.
- If you can't read it, don't eat it. Try to look for foods that are made from natural ingredients.

By learning label literacy, our workshop participants are armed with the know-how to debunk packaging myths, and are better equipped to make healthier meal choices. Try out these tips next time you shop!