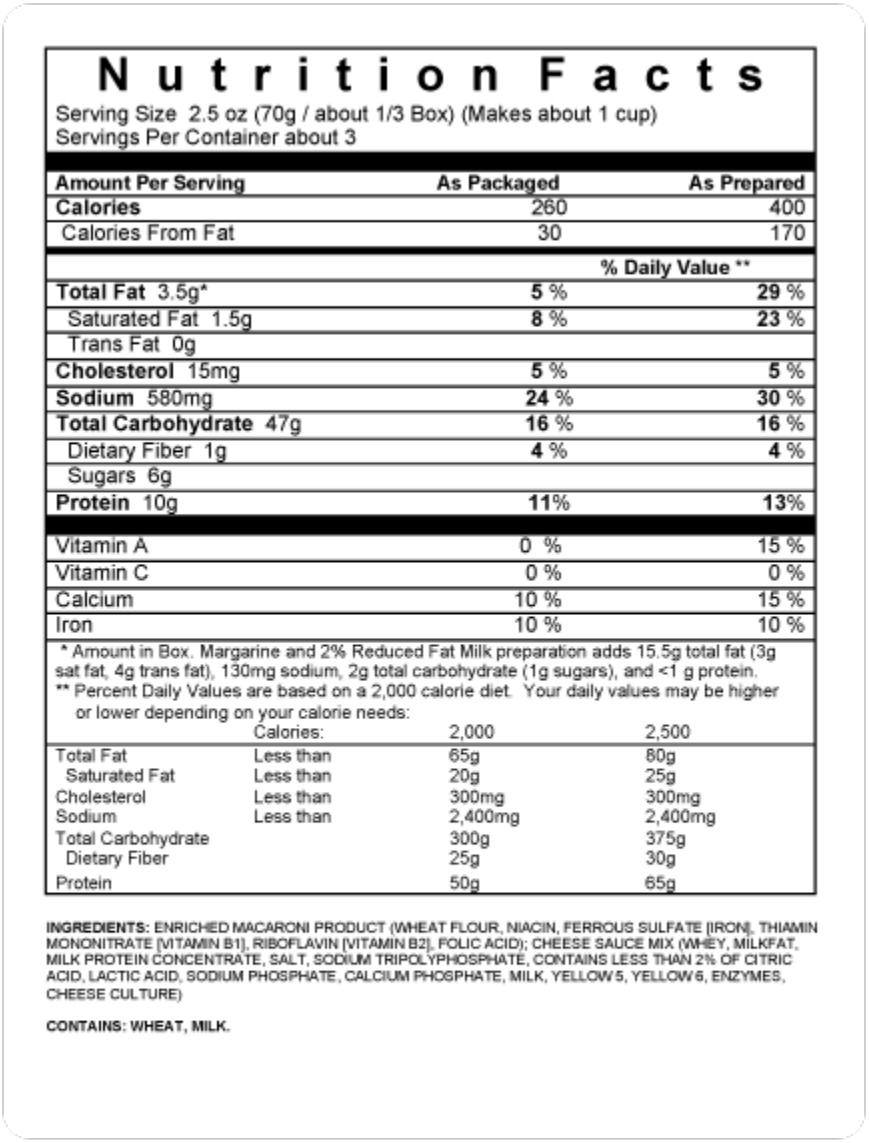
How to read a food label Part 1: Serving Size and Calories

by Michele Brannan, MPAS, PA-C
January 14 2015 11:15 AM

For those of us wanting to get into the new year eating right and making healthier choices, here are a few pointers when picking foods off the shelf.I suggest starting at the top of the label. Glance at the serving size and the number of servings in the package. Most foods have more than one serving in the package.Second in line is the calorie amount. Calories are a measure of energy you get from food. The General Guide to Calories is based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Eating too many calories in a day can lead to obesity.As an example, let's take the label for Kraft macaroni and cheese. Note that one

serving is about 1 cup. Assuming you'll eat the food after its prepared and not right out of the box, you will consume 400 calories with that one cup of mac 'n cheese.



Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 2.5 oz (70g / about 1/3 Box) (Makes about 1 cup)
Servings Per Container about 3

Amount Per Serving	As Packaged	As Prepared
Calories	260	400
Calories From Fat	30	170
		% Daily Value **
Total Fat 3.5g*	**5** %	**29** %
Saturated Fat 1.5g	**8** %	**23** %
Trans Fat 0g		
Cholesterol 15mg	**5** %	**5** %
Sodium 580mg	**24** %	**30** %
Total Carbohydrate 47g	**16** %	**16** %
Dietary Fiber 1g	**4** %	**4** %
Sugars 6g		
Protein 10g	**11**%	**13**%
Vitamin A	0 %	15 %
Vitamin C	0 %	0 %
Calcium	10 %	15 %
Iron	10 %	10 %

* Amount in Box. Margarine and 2% Reduced Fat Milk preparation adds 15.5g total fat (3g sat fat, 4g trans fat), 130mg sodium, 2g total carbohydrate (1g sugars), and <1 g protein.
** Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

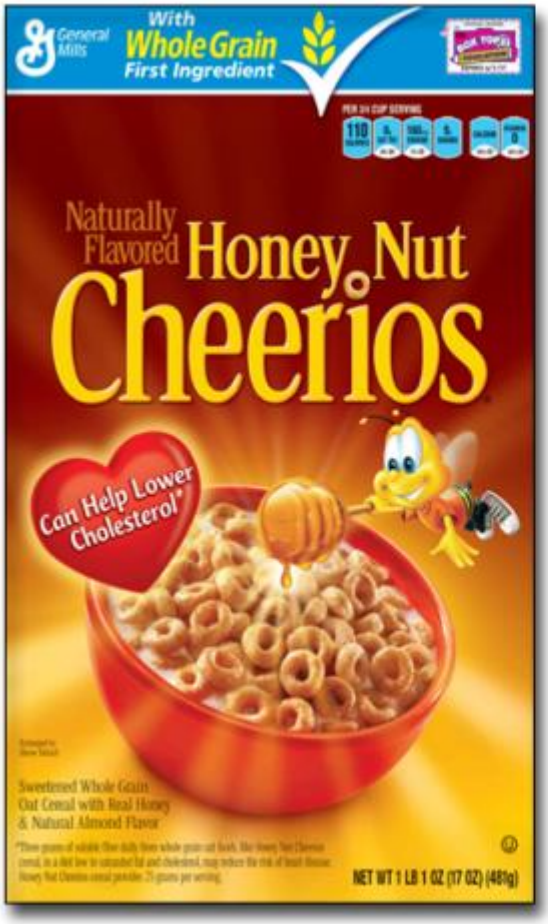
	Calories:	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Saturated Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g
Protein		50g	65g

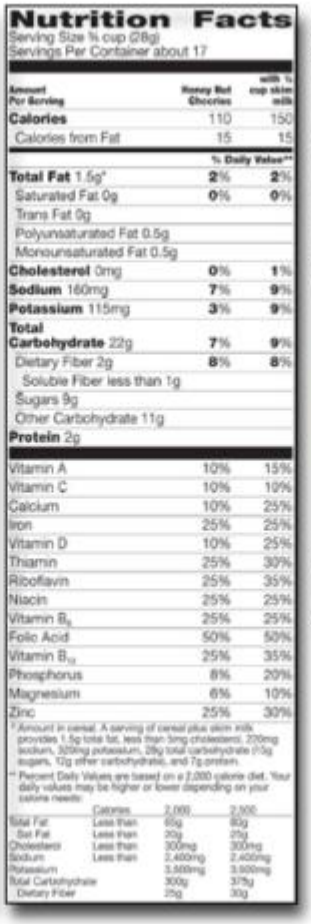
INGREDIENTS: ENRICHED MACARONI PRODUCT (WHEAT FLOUR, NIACIN, FERROUS SULFATE [IRON], THIAMIN MONONITRATE [VITAMIN B1], RIBOFLAVIN [VITAMIN B2], FOLIC ACID); CHEESE SAUCE MIX (WHEY, MILKFAT, MILK PROTEIN CONCENTRATE, SALT, SODIUM TRIPOLYPHOSPHATE, CONTAINS LESS THAN 2% OF CITRIC ACID, LACTIC ACID, SODIUM PHOSPHATE, CALCIUM PHOSPHATE, MILK, YELLOW 5, YELLOW 6, ENZYMES, CHEESE CULTURE)

CONTAINS: WHEAT, MILK.

Now let's assume that one mere cup of mac 'n cheese doesn't satiate your hunger and you eat the whole box. How many servings are in the whole box? The answer is 3.So, let's multiply the amount of calories (400) by 3. That equals 1200 calories. Simply put, that's a lot of calories, especially if you want to eat something besides one box of Macaroni and Cheese in a day. If you ate one box of that for lunch, what about the calories from breakfast and dinner? What about the soda you drank at lunch? That 12 oz can of Coke cost you another 140 calories. You can see it is easy to accumulate more than the standard 2,000 calories per day. Several "diets" reduce you to 1800 or even a more stringent 1200 calories per day. On a 1200-calorie per day diet, once you eat that one box of mac 'n cheese, you're done. Well, besides water.This is not to say that you

can never eat mac 'n cheese. But it is a good idea to be cognizant of the numbers on the label before putting the food in your mouth.Let's take another example of Honey Nut Cheerios. You are making a healthier choice by switching to skim milk instead of 2% as





Nutrition Facts

Serving Size ¾ cup (28g)
Servings Per Container about 17

Amount Per Serving	Honey Nut Cheerios	with ½ cup skim milk
Calories	110	150
Calories from Fat	15	15
	% Daily Value**	
Total Fat 1.5g*	2%	2%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%	0%
Trans Fat 0g		
Polyunsaturated Fat 0.5g		
Monounsaturated Fat 0.5g		
Cholesterol 0mg	0%	1%
Sodium 160mg	7%	9%
Potassium 115mg	3%	9%
Total Carbohydrate 22g	7%	9%
Dietary Fiber 2g	8%	8%
Soluble Fiber less than 1g		
Sugars 9g		
Other Carbohydrate 11g		
Protein 2g		
Vitamin A	10%	15%
Vitamin C	10%	10%
Calcium	10%	25%
Iron	25%	25%
Vitamin D	10%	25%
Thiamin	25%	30%
Riboflavin	25%	35%
Niacin	25%	25%
Vitamin B_6	25%	25%
Folic Acid	50%	50%
Vitamin B_{12}	25%	35%
Phosphorus	8%	20%
Magnesium	6%	10%
Zinc	25%	30%

* Amount in cereal. A serving of cereal plus skim milk provides 1.5g total fat, less than 5mg cholesterol, 220mg sodium, 320mg potassium, 28g total carbohydrate (10g sugars, 10g other carbohydrate), and 7g protein.

** 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
Sat Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Potassium		3,500mg	3,500mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Ingredients: Whole Grain Oats, Sugar, Oat Bran, Modified Corn Starch, Honey, Brown Sugar Syrup, Salt, Tripotassium Phosphate, Canola and/or Rice Bran Oil, Natural Almond Flavor. Vitamin E (mixed tocopherols) Added to Preserve Freshness.

Vitamins and Minerals: Calcium Carbonate, Zinc and Iron (mineral nutrients), Vitamin C (sodium ascorbate), A B Vitamin (niacinamide), Vitamin B_6 (pyridoxine hydrochloride), Vitamin B_2 (riboflavin), Vitamin B_1 (thiamin mononitrate), Vitamin A (palmitate), A B Vitamin (folic acid), Vitamin B_{12}, Vitamin D_3.

CONTAINS ALMOND; MAY CONTAIN WHEAT INGREDIENTS.

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it is lower in fat.

How much is in one serving? And how many calories are in that one serving?Several cereals have one serving equal 3/4 cup. But who really uses a three-quarter measuring cup for cereal? I suggest trying the measuring cup for a few rounds to get an idea on how much you're actually eating. For practice, view the Honey Nut Cheerios label here, and assume you eat 1 1/2 cups of cereal. How many calories is this? If you've answered 300, you're right.Consider making a food diary for one week, marking down what foods you eat and how many calories consumed therein. If you have a smartphone, check out the MyFitnessPal app, which is an easy way to monitor your calories. Being aware of how much you are putting in your mouth is the first step in making healthier food choices. *In part 2 we will go over fat and cholesterol and how those numbers are addressed on the food label. Stay tuned!*

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