

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size Entire Recipe 187g (187 g)

Amount Per Serving

Calories _____ Calories from Fat 31

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 4g

Saturated Fat 1g

Trans Fat _____

Cholesterol 0mg

Sodium 3mg

Total Carbohydrate 20g

Making Sense of Nutrition Guidelines and Labels

BY KATIE M. MCLAUGHLIN

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SATURATED FAT AND TRANS FAT? How much calcium do growing kids need? And just how much protein is in those chicken nuggets you're serving up for dinner tonight?

If those questions make your head spin, you're not alone. "Some people think nutrition is easy, but it's really not," said Marguerite Ferrara, assistant director of education at the Byrnes Health Education Center in York.

What's more, the official guidelines handed down by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food & Drug Administration aren't exactly set in stone. Just when you think you've got a grip on what you should and should not be feeding your kids—not to mention putting in your own mouth—new recommendations are rolled out.

Here's how to make sense of the most up-to-date guidelines, plus how to make them work for your family.

FROM MYPLATE TO YOUR DINNER TABLE

The visual tool handed down by the USDA has evolved from the original four food groups to the food pyramid to the current MyPlate icon.

MyPlate illustrates the main food groups that are essential for a healthy diet—fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins,

and dairy—using a familiar place setting image. Its goal is to encourage healthier eating by demonstrating what a balanced plate really looks like.

"What's nice about MyPlate is that it's so approachable and user-friendly," explained Angie Dye, registered dietician nutritionist and owner of Carpe Diem Nutrition in Hershey. "Instead of worrying about so many servings over the course of a day, you take it one plate at a time."

Dye thinks the most eye-opening aspect of the MyPlate tool is the recommendation that half of your plate should be filled with fruits and vegetables. "As a society, we don't have as much emphasis on fruits and vegetables as we should. It's good for kids and parents alike to get that message," she said.

The rest of the suggested plate contains grains (half of which should be whole grains), proteins (which should mostly be lean choices), and a small serving of dairy. "If you consistently balance your plate that way, you're going to be making good, healthy choices," Dye said.

According to Ferrara, another way to look at the MyPlate guidelines is to focus on eating the rainbow. "The basic recommendation is to eat every color every day," she explained. "If you eat every color every day, you will get the nutrients you need, and that's a concept kids can recognize."

DECODING NUTRITION LABELS

Between calorie counts, milligrams of sodium, and grams of fiber, nutrition labels can quickly make you cross-eyed. And sometimes, when you're running late or the kids are whining in the grocery store, you feel like you don't have the time or energy to compare different products.

When that's the case, Dye suggests focusing on the most important part of the nutrition label: the ingredient list. "Looking at the ingredients is key to deciding whether to serve that food to your child or family," she explained. "You shouldn't need a master's degree in nutrition science to read the ingredients; if you don't know what something is, put it back on the shelf."

Another part of the label worth perusing? The serving size. "It can change from product to product, even within a single brand," warned Ferrara, which means you could accidentally be serving your child three or more servings of cereal at breakfast.

Ferrara also recommends scanning the grams of sugar per serving. Her trick is to take the number of grams on the label and divide it by four, which tells you how many teaspoons of sugar it contains. "That's a better visual for you," she explained. "Now you can picture exactly how much sugar you're giving your kid."

Finally, check out the bottom of the label

where the nutrients are listed along with a percentage of recommended daily values. Foods with high amounts of nutrients—defined by Ferrara as anything twenty percent or higher—are generally good choices. "Those are nutrient-dense foods. You want to stay away from empty calories."

WHAT REALLY COUNTS

Both Dye and Ferrara say that the bottom line isn't about getting hung up on specific guidelines or numbers; it's about balancing your life and your meals to reflect healthy choices most of the time. "My best piece of advice is actually to eat as a family as often as you can," said Dye. "I've been a dietician for 17 years—I've seen a lot of families and kids—and I've never seen a picky eater who sits down and eats with their family every night. The data shows amazing benefits in terms of a child's health."

For Ferrara, the key is preparation. "Plan ahead," she suggested, "by cutting up those fruits and vegetables ahead of time, or keeping healthy snacks in the car to have on the way to soccer practice. That will help you bypass the fast food joint and meet the healthy eating guidelines."

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IS **gluten-free** RIGHT FOR YOUR FAMILY?

As the name implies, a gluten-free diet is one in which gluten—found in grains such as wheat, barley, and rye—is eliminated for health reasons.

Going gluten-free is all the rage these days (one survey reported almost a third of adults find a gluten-free diet appealing), but is it really the healthiest option for your family?

Angie Dye, registered dietician nutritionist who specializes in gluten-free diets, says not necessarily. “Sometimes people assume that a gluten-free alternative food is a healthier choice, but a lot of times it’s not,” she explained.

■ **WHO SHOULD DO IT?** Dye said that a gluten-free diet is only essential for a small slice of people: those with celiac disease, an autoimmune disease in which eating gluten damages the small intestine, and those with a wheat allergy or what’s called a non-celiac gluten sensitivity.

Gluten issues can be difficult to diagnose because there are more than

200 signs and symptoms associated with gluten intolerance problems—ranging from recurring abdominal pain to fatigue to tooth discoloration—and many people display no symptoms at all. Young children tend to show the more classic signs of celiac disease, including growth problems and chronic diarrhea or constipation.

So if you or your child is complaining of gastrointestinal discomfort, or even just noticing some unexplainable symptoms that aren’t responding to other treatments, you might be able to benefit from a gluten-free diet.

■ **WHO SHOULD NOT DO IT?** In short: everybody else. “Gluten is just a protein,” Dye explained. “Unless you form an allergic reaction to gluten, there’s nothing unhealthy about it.” In fact, eliminating gluten from your diet when you don’t have celiac disease or another form of gluten intolerance can actually make you less healthy.

The reason? Dye says that pack-

aged gluten-free foods—items like breads, crackers, and pasta—are often not as enriched with vitamins as their traditional counterparts.

“It’s typically easier to get more nutrients when there’s gluten in your diet,” she said.

■ **GETTING STARTED.** If you suspect that you or your child would benefit from a gluten-free diet, it’s vital to speak with your doctor or pediatrician before taking matters into your own hands and eliminating gluten from your plate.

That’s because the test conducted by gastroenterologists to diagnose an autoimmune disease like celiac is only accurate when the person is still eating gluten. “If you take your 5-year-old off gluten beforehand,” Dye warned, “two or three years later, it’s much harder to test for and diagnose celiac disease or another problem with gluten.”

If you end up with a positive test result—or if your doctor or pediatrician recommends eliminating gluten

for other reasons—don’t immediately start stocking your pantry with gluten-free products. It’s best to talk to a registered dietician first, and preferably one well versed in gluten-free diets, to ensure you or your child will still get the needed nutrients for health and growth.

“There’s a lot to learn, and much of it is very confusing,” Dye said. “A professional can help you be sure you’re getting all gluten-containing foods and products out, and make sure your overall diet is adequate.”

The good news is that many healthy foods are naturally gluten-free, including fruits and vegetables, eggs, beans, and fresh meats, fish, and poultry.

Additionally, parents should be aware that children whose bodies don’t tolerate gluten often have other food allergies or sensitivities, such as dairy products and nuts, so working with an expert is helpful in making the full range of necessary changes both effective and manageable. ■

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