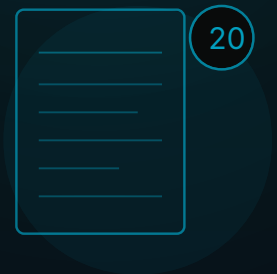


The complete *label guide*

A fully annotated sample nutrition label, a line-by-line breakdown, and every ingredient alias worth knowing, in one private reference.



Most People Scan Wrong

Calories first is the instinct almost everyone starts with, and it's close to the least useful number on the entire label for this way of eating.

A label has maybe five numbers that actually matter and a dozen more that exist mostly to look reassuring. You cannot judge the quality of a food from the numbers alone, the real story is usually in the ingredient list underneath them. This guide covers both: the numbers, in full, and the ingredients, in full, with a real annotated label so nothing is abstract.

Twenty seconds is a real target once this becomes automatic. Getting there means understanding the whole label properly first, which is what the next few pages are for.

Every Number, Annotated

A standard Nutrition Facts panel, with the nine checkpoints that actually matter marked directly on it. Match each cyan number below to its explanation on the right.

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
1 Serving size	2/3 cup (55g)
2 Amount per serving	
Calories	230
	% Daily Value*
3 Total Fat	10%
8g	
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
4 Sodium	7%
160mg	
5 Total Carbohydrate	13%
37g	
6 Dietary Fiber	14%
4g	
7 Total Sugars	
12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
8 Protein	
3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
9 Potassium	6%
235mg	
*The % Daily Value tells you how much a nutrient in a serving contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.	

1 Serving Size & Servings Per Container

Every number below is based on this. If the bag is 8 servings and you eat two, double everything first.

2 Calories

Useful last, not first. A low-calorie product can still be nutritionally poor, and a higher-calorie one can be exactly right.

3 Total Fat, Saturated, Trans

Saturated fat isn't the flag it once was for this way of eating. Trans fat at 0g is good, but check the ingredients for "partially hydrogenated" regardless, labels can round tiny amounts down to zero.

4 Sodium

Rarely a concern on a lower-carbohydrate pattern, where sodium needs actually run higher. Context matters more than the % Daily Value here.

5 Total Carbohydrate

The header number for the whole carb section. Subtract fiber from this to get what your body actually absorbs.

6 Dietary Fiber

37g total carbs minus 4g fiber leaves 33g of net carbs in this example, a very different number from the headline 37g.

7 Total Sugars & Added Sugars

The most important line on the entire label. "Added Sugars" specifically tells you what was put in deliberately, separate from anything naturally occurring.

8 Protein

Check this against the carbohydrate count. Real nutritional value looks like protein and fat carrying the calories, not carbohydrate alone.

9 Vitamins & Minerals

Worth a glance but rarely decisive. A fortified processed food can show great numbers here and still be a poor overall choice.

THE METHOD

Five Steps, In Order

Once the label above makes sense, this is the fast version. Read these in sequence, in the aisle, on any product.

-
- | | | |
|--|---------------------------|--------|
| 01 | SERVING SIZE FIRST | ~3 sec |
| Check what the whole label is actually based on, using checkpoint 1 from the sample label. | | |
-
- | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|--------|
| 02 | FIRST THREE INGREDIENTS | ~5 sec |
| Ingredients are listed by weight, heaviest first. If sugar, flour, or a seed oil shows up in the first three, that's most of what's actually in the product. | | |
-
- | | | |
|---|---|--------|
| 03 | TOTAL CARBS, THEN SUBTRACT FIBER | ~4 sec |
| Checkpoints 5 and 6. The subtraction is the number your body actually deals with. | | |
-
- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------|
| 04 | ADDED SUGARS, SPECIFICALLY | ~3 sec |
| Checkpoint 7. Not "total sugars," which includes naturally occurring sugar in dairy or fruit. | | |
-
- | | | |
|--|-------------------------|--------|
| 05 | SCAN FOR ALIASES | ~5 sec |
| A five-second sweep of the full ingredient list for a sugar, starch, oil, or protein filler by another name, all covered on the following pages. | | |
-

Sugar, By Its Other Names

Manufacturers can't legally hide sugar, but they can rename it often enough that most shoppers stop recognizing it.

Dextrose	Maltose	Sucrose	Fructose	Glucose	Glucose syrup	Corn syrup	High fructose corn syrup
Cane juice	Cane crystals	Brown rice syrup	Beet syrup	Fruit nectar	Juice concentrate	Agave	
Molasses	Honey	Maltitol	Sorbitol				

QUICK RULE

If it ends in "-ose," or the word "syrup," "nectar," or "concentrate" shows up next to a fruit name, treat it as sugar. Maltitol and sorbitol are sugar alcohols rather than sugar itself, worth their own caution since large amounts can cause genuine digestive distress.

Starches, By Their Other Names

Cheap to produce, used to thicken, bind, and extend shelf life. These carry real carbohydrate weight while reading as harmless filler.

Corn starch

Modified corn starch

Modified food starch

Corn syrup solids

Corn sweetener

Corn flour

Wheat flour

Rice flour

Potato flour

Tapioca flour

Maltodextrin

QUICK RULE

Maltodextrin in particular is worth flagging on its own. Despite not tasting sweet, it carries a higher glycemic impact than table sugar in some studies, and shows up constantly in "low sugar" and "keto-friendly" marketed snacks specifically because it doesn't taste like sugar.

Seed Oils, By Name

These show up in almost every packaged sauce, dressing, and snack on the shelf, usually a few ingredients down the list where fewer people are still reading.

Vegetable oil

Canola oil

Soybean oil

Corn oil

Sunflower oil

Safflower oil

Cottonseed oil

Grapeseed oil

Rice bran oil

Margarine

Hydrogenated oil

Partially hydrogenated oil

QUICK RULE

Olive oil, avocado oil, coconut oil, ghee, and butter are the names you're looking to see instead. "Partially hydrogenated" anything is worth avoiding outright regardless of the amount listed.

Protein Isolates & Fillers

The category most people never think to check, especially on protein bars and shakes where "high protein" on the front makes the ingredient list feel unnecessary to read.

Soy protein isolate

Soy protein concentrate

Hydrolyzed soy protein

Textured vegetable protein

Wheat gluten

Hydrolyzed corn protein

Calcium caseinate

Sodium caseinate

Potassium caseinate

Hydrolyzed casein

QUICK RULE

None of these are automatically dangerous, but a long list of isolated and hydrolyzed proteins alongside a syrup and a sugar alcohol is a strong sign the "protein bar" in your hand is closer to a candy bar with a protein claim bolted onto the label.

How To Spot Ultra-Processed Food, Fast

You don't need a food science degree for this. Three quick tells, on top of the categories from the last four pages, catch most ultra-processed products in seconds.

● SIGNS OF ULTRA-PROCESSING

A long ingredient list

Names you can't pronounce

Names you don't recognize as food

A sugar, starch, oil, or protein filler in the first three ingredients

Multiple categories from the last four pages appearing together

● THE ONE-LINE TEST

If you read the ingredient list out loud and it sounds more like a chemistry set than a recipe you could recreate in your own kitchen, that's ultra-processed, regardless of what the front of the package claims.

What The Front Of The Box Really Means

Front-of-package claims are marketing copy, not nutrition facts. Here's what each one actually guarantees, which is usually less than it sounds like.

"Natural"

Largely unregulated. Says nothing about sugar, carbohydrate count, or processing level.

"Superfood"

Not a regulated or scientific term. One genuinely nutrient-dense ingredient can be added in a small enough amount to justify the label while the rest of the product is unchanged.

"Heart-Healthy"

Often based on a single factor, usually low saturated fat, while ignoring added sugar or refined carbohydrate content entirely.

"Plant-Based"

Describes the source, not the processing level. A plant-based product can still be built almost entirely from refined starches, seed oils, and isolated proteins.

"No Added Sugar"

Accurate as far as it goes, but the product can still be naturally high in sugar, or lean on sugar alcohols that bring their own digestive trade-offs.

"Gluten-Free"

Says nothing about carbohydrate count. Often replaces wheat flour with rice, potato, or tapioca starch, sometimes landing at a higher net carb count than the original.

"Keto-Friendly" / "Low Carb"

Not a standardized claim. Always run the actual label through the five-step method rather than trusting the sticker on the front.

WORTH WATCHING

The FDA proposed a mandatory front-of-package label in January 2025 that would flag saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar as "Low," "Medium," or "High" at a glance. It isn't final or in stores yet, but if it goes into effect, some of this guesswork gets easier. Until then, the back of the package is still where the real answer lives.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Reading A Real Label, Live

A generic sweetened breakfast cereal, walked through the five-step method exactly as you'd do it standing in the aisle.

Nutrition Facts	
12 servings per container	
Serving size	3/4 cup (30g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	120
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 1g	1%
Sodium 210mg	9%
Total Carbohydrate 26g	9%
Dietary Fiber 1g	4%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 11g Added Sugars	22%
Protein 1g	
Ingredients: Corn Flour, Sugar, Corn Syrup, Corn Starch, Salt, Vegetable Oil (Soybean, Canola), Artificial Color, Natural & Artificial Flavor.	

1 Serving Size Check

Twelve servings at 3/4 cup each. Most people pour a bowl closer to double that without realizing it, quietly doubling every number below.

2 First Three Ingredients

Corn flour, sugar, corn syrup. Two of the first three ingredients are sugar in different forms before anything else even appears.

3 Net Carbs

26g total carbohydrate minus 1g fiber leaves 25g of net carbs, in a serving most people don't actually stop at.

4 Added Sugars

11 of the 12 grams of sugar are added, 22% of a daily value, from one bowl of cereal before milk is even added.

5 Aliases Found

Corn syrup (sugar alias), corn starch (starch filler), and soybean and canola oil (seed oils), all three red flag categories in one product.

THE VERDICT

This clears "low fat" and looks harmless enough at a glance. The moment you check serving size, subtract fiber, and read added sugars specifically, it reads as what it actually is: a dessert marketed as breakfast.

Category Cheat Sheet

A few categories where the label is especially easy to misread. Here's exactly what to check first in each.

CATEGORY	CHECK FIRST	COMMON TRAP
Bread	Net carbs per slice, then the first ingredient	"Whole grain" still often lists flour first
Yogurt	Added sugars line, not total sugars	Flavored yogurt can carry more sugar than dessert
Sauces & Dressings	Serving size, it's usually smaller than a real portion	Sugar and seed oil both hide a few ingredients down
Protein Bars	Sugar alcohol type and protein isolate list	High protein doesn't rule out a high sugar alcohol load
Cereal & Granola	Added sugars per real-world portion, not per "serving"	"Contains whole grains" says nothing about sugar
"Healthy" Snacks	First three ingredients, always	Front claims (natural, superfood, plant-based) say nothing about processing

This is a scanning method for everyday shopping decisions. Sample label figures are illustrative, built to demonstrate the method, not copied from any specific product.



Twenty seconds, every time you shop,
adds up to a very different pantry.

Photograph any label you're unsure about and send it over before your
next check-in.

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