

DECODING NUTRITION LABELS

Understanding nutrition and how to select healthy food is a key life skill. In this lesson, children learn about the importance of nutrition labels and how making informed choices about the food they eat can benefit their health.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Kids will apply knowledge of nutrients and healthy food categories to compare kitchen products. Participants will be able to make reasoned decisions and take appropriate action relating to personal health and well-being.

RUNNING THE LESSON

Discussion (5 minutes)

What are nutrition labels and what are the benefits of having them?

Answers: Nutrition labels contain a list of important nutrients our bodies need to provide energy and help us grow. They make it easier to compare similar foods to help us find the healthier option. Labels help us navigate different foods so we can get more or less of specific nutrients as needed. They also help us manage a special diet (e.g. allergies).

What kinds of foods have nutrition labels?

Answers: All packaged foods have one. Fresh produce does not because it is a single ingredient.

Activity A (15 minutes)

Draw two columns on a blackboard or flip chart paper with the following headings:

- Things you want more of
- Things you want less of

Have kids select one piece of paper with a nutrient on it and choose which column it belongs in, then explain why.

Things you want more of:

Fibre: helps move food through the body and keeps the digestive system healthy.

Vitamins: help the body grow and stay healthy. e.g. Vitamin A helps our skin and night vision. It can be found in carrots.

AGE: 8-14, flexible

TIME: 60 minutes

MATERIALS AND SETUP:

- Chart paper with with two sample nutrition labels drawn out, comparing two versions of a similar food item
- Coloured paper printed with a nutrient name (carbohydrates, fibre, protein, saturated fat, trans fat, vitamins, minerals, calories, cholesterol, sodium, sugar)
- Tables set up for group work
- For each table, set aside 4-6 different brands of cereal, soup, juice, pasta sauce, or snack bars (of similar serving size listed on the label) to compare

"Sometimes" vs. "everyday" foods

We don't want to demonize food — we want kids to be excited about making delicious healthy choices. This lesson allows kids the power to make informed decisions about what they're putting in their bodies.

Some less healthy foods have important meaning to kids' family or culture. We can celebrate that by calling those dishes "sometimes food" — ones that we may love but eat less often.

Protein: provides energy and helps to develop bone, muscle, skin, and blood.

Minerals: help build bones, muscles, and teeth. e.g. calcium is important for keeping your bones strong and can be found in dairy products.

Things you want less of:

Calories:	too much unused energy will turn into fat.
Carbohydrates:	the source of energy for your body. Carbohydrates power your cells, tissues and organs.
Trans fat	found in processed foods. Try to avoid.
Saturated fat:	found in friend foods and animal products. Too much of this unhealthy fat can raise cholesterol levels.
Cholesterol:	too much can lead to heart disease.
Sodium:	too much can lead to problems like hypertension and high blood pressure.
Sugar:	too much can lead to weight gain and/or tooth decay.

Note that we actually need all of these things, but too much can lead to health issues. What's important is to know how much is too much.

Activity B (15 minutes)

1. Have two large examples of nutrition labels drawn on chart paper for two similar food items. Explain how to understand the label while comparing the two label examples to figure out which is the healthier option. Highlight the main differences to make it easier to compare.

2. Check the ingredients list.

- How many ingredients are there? Which ingredients does it contain more and less of? (The ingredients are listed in order from most present to least.)
- Do you recognize the ingredients? How processed is it?
- Do you see any common allergens on the list?

3. Look at the % Daily Value for each nutrient which represents the amount of that nutrient the average person should have per day. The closer the number is to 100, the closer you are to how much you need for the day. (Alert! The labels assume you're a full grown adult so kids will need less of everything.)

4. Which brand is healthier? Have kids identify the brand with more vitamins, minerals, fibre, protein, and less sodium, saturated fat, trans fat, and sugars.

Activity C (20 minutes)

1. Split up into smaller groups. Distribute at least four versions of a similar food to each group. First, everyone writes down their guess of which is the healthiest option (without looking at the nutritional information). Now their job is to put the items in order of healthiest to least healthy. Have the children debate and explain their rationale to each other.

2. Now have the whole group visit each table together.

At each table, the team of children will explain to the rest of the group why they ordered the food items the way they did. Does everyone agree? Disagree? Is anyone surprised by how items were ordered? Are some items that appeared "healthier" due to the packaging actually worse for you?

TASTE TEST

Here's an extra activity you can do to really experience processed vs. fresh food.

1. Give kids a taste of three items that are derived from the same food source. Example: raw peas, low sodium canned peas and regular canned peas.

2. Discuss:

- Which tasted better of the fresh, low sodium, or regular canned options?
- Why is salt added when food is processed? (For flavour because processing removes natural flavour.)
- Why are food manufacturers now making products that are low in salt? (Because of the health risks associated with consuming too much salt.)
- Hopefully kids will agree that the fresh peas tasted the best and you can discuss how they also have the highest nutritional value and no preservatives.

3. In a group, select three students to use the teaspoon and measure out the actual sugar and salt content of the peas.