

Fueling the Runner: A Runner's Guide to Label Reading What Matters Most

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Are you one of those people in the grocery store who looks like he's wearing blinders? He grabs the same foods time and time again. Open your eyes to all those wonderful products on the market screaming for your attention.

Attention Grabbers

First, look for what I like to call 'attention grabbers'. These are foods that have some sort of claim in bold print. But don't be fooled. The quality of a product should never be based solely on the claims on the front of the box. The attention grabbing label should only be considered a tool for narrowing down worthwhile products.

Try looking for key ingredients as the attention grabber. For example, products may highlight ingredients in the following fashion, "Omega-3's from Flax Oil," "Excellent Source of Whole Grain," or "As Much Calcium as a Glass of Milk." Many of these highlighted ingredients contain nutrients that are very important to the diet of a runner. These products should be favorably considered for further investigation.

Nutrition Panel 101

Alright, let's turn the box over. Look at all that information! Do you ever wonder where to begin? Check out the serving size first. The information throughout the nutrition facts panel is based on the serving size located at the top of the panel. Reading the serving size will let you know how much you need to eat to actually get all that great energy and nutrition listed below.

Calories are located just below the serving size and are calculated based on the fat, carbohydrate, and protein within each food serving. Caloric needs vary significantly for each individual. As a general rule of thumb, look for each food product to range up to about 200 calories per serving. In theory a 200 calorie per serving guideline should allow for more nutrients to sneak into the diet as you will have to add a greater variety of foods to meet your caloric needs.

Runners commonly aim for diets very low in fat. A low fat diet is great, but remember that fat is needed for the absorption of essential fat soluble vitamins. It can also be a good source of energy for runners with high caloric demands.

Pay particular attention to the percent of daily value from fat. Aim for each product you choose to read 10% or less of "% DV" from fat. Always try to consume healthy fats by looking for unsaturated fats as the fat source. Saturated fats need to be kept to a minimum, trans fat should be avoided altogether.

You likely already know that carbohydrates are the primary fuel source for your training and racing. On a label, total carbohydrates are separated out as dietary fiber and sugar. Dietary fiber is a great addition to any diet.

Every meal and snack should contain a good source of fiber. Aim for a daily total of at least 25-35 grams. Sugar is naturally occurring in many foods such as fruit, which contains fructose, and milk, which contains lactose. These are good, nutrient dense sources of sugars. If the label reads high in sugar and it is not naturally occurring in the food, it is likely a poor quality source of carbohydrate such as corn syrup or table sugar. Try to keep the grams of these refined sugars to a minimum. A great food selection for a runner would be high in carbohydrates, moderate to high in fiber, and low in sugar.

Next, move your eyes down to the protein. Protein is needed for numerous reasons including tissue building, maintenance, and repair. Look for at least a few grams of protein per serving in your selection, about 5-15 grams. Each meal should include at least one major source of higher protein content, about 15-30 grams. The overall daily goal is at least 0.6 and up to 0.9 grams of protein per pound of body weight.

Let's not forget about micronutrients. Look for the nutrition facts panel to read 10% or more of the RDA of several vitamins or minerals. Add up each vitamin or mineral that reads 10% or higher. The more vitamins and minerals greater than 10% in a product, the better the product is at providing the micronutrients you need.

Ingredients

Lastly, we need to browse through the ingredients list. Ingredients are listed in an order from the largest to the smallest amount in the product based on weight. The ingredients present in the largest quantity are listed first.

Reading the ingredients helps you understand what exactly is going into your body. For example, if sugar and corn syrup are listed as the first ingredients, the food is high in refined sugars. However if you read first ingredients such as oats and barley, the food choice is starting off as a great source of grain. Also look for natural ingredients. If a label is filled with ingredients you cannot define or pronounce, consider looking for a more natural alternative.

Make an effort to mix up your routine and check out new products on the market. Your food decisions will be well informed if you read the labels thoroughly. This method will guide you to creating ideal food combinations for the perfect meal or snack. Evaluate how the product is marketed, the nutrition facts panel breakdown, and ingredients list. This method of product analysis will provide a great foundation for a higher quality diet.

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