

Healthy Eating Workshop

Reading and understanding food labels

Workshop outline (60 minutes)

1. Welcome (5 minutes)
2. Whole versus processed foods (10 minutes)
3. Packaged Foods – how do you choose? (30 minutes)
4. Let's Practice (10 minutes)
5. Closing (5 minutes)

Suggested handout:

[How to Read a Nutrition Facts label](#)

(see Page 2 of the above linked handout)

1. Welcome (5 minutes)

Slide 1:

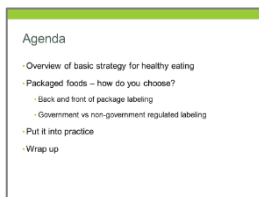


A. Introduction

Welcome to today's healthy eating workshop. My name is <insert facilitator name>. The topic of today's workshop is reading and understanding food labels.

Ask participants to fill out a name tag and discuss any housekeeping such as bathrooms, breaks, etc.

Slide 2:



B. Agenda

Let's review our agenda for today's workshop.

- We'll start with an overview of a basic strategy for healthy eating.
- The bulk of the workshop will be devoted to learning about the types of information on the front and back of packaged foods and how you can use it to make healthier choices.
- We'll have time to put what we learned into practice.
- And finally, we'll wrap up by discussing some additional resources you can use to continue learning and answer any questions you have.

🕒 If short on time, ask participants to hold their questions until the end of the presentation.

Slide 3:

Objectives

After today's workshop, you will:

- 1. Know where to find reliable information on food packaging
- 2. Understand how to verify information on the front of food labels
- 3. Be able to use information on food packaging to make healthy and informed food choices

C. Objectives

After today's workshop, you will:

- Know where to find reliable information on food packaging
- Understand how to verify information on the front of food labels
- Be able to use information on food packaging to make healthy and informed food choices

2. Whole Versus Processed Foods (10 minutes)

Slide 4:

Whole Foods

- Nothing added, nothing taken away
 - No unhealthy fat, sugar or salt added
 - No vitamins, minerals, or fiber taken away
- Examples:
 - fresh fruits/vegetables
 - whole grains
 - nuts, legumes, eggs

A. Whole foods

Before we dive into today's topic, let's review a broad strategy for healthy eating. Choosing whole and minimally processed foods more often than processed foods is one way to eat healthier.

Whole foods are foods to which nothing is added and nothing is taken away. When food is processed, unhealthy fat, sugar and salt usually get added. All are ingredients that can contribute to your risk of developing a chronic disease. Vitamins, minerals and fiber are all components that contribute to the nutritional value of foods and usually get taken away during processing.

Some examples of whole foods are fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts, legumes and eggs.

You can think of all foods as being on a spectrum of whole foods to highly processed foods. We all eat foods from the entire spectrum. But choosing to eat mostly whole foods or minimally processed foods is a strategy you can use to eat healthier. Let's see what that means.

Slide 5:

Whole vs. Processed: Fruits, Veggies, Proteins, Grains

Whole Foods Healthiest → Processed Foods Least Healthy

B. Whole vs. Processed Foods

Let's look at how this concept applies to foods in the fruits, vegetables, protein and grains food groups. As you can see in the first column, the most whole foods from each of these food groups are the healthiest. These include fresh fruits and vegetables; whole grains, such as oats; vegetable-based proteins, like beans and lentils; and lean cuts of meat.

As foods become more processed, they lose some nutrients or gain some unhealthy components. These minimally processed foods can still be good options and contribute to a healthy diet. Foods in this minimally processed category include frozen fruits and vegetables, canned fruits and vegetables, white rice or homemade meatballs.

When choosing canned fruits and vegetables, what are some things you can do to make them healthier?

- Buy fruit packed in 100% juice, not in syrup or light syrup
- Buy low or no sodium canned vegetables
- Rinse canned vegetables before eating

What about when choosing frozen fruit or vegetables? What can you do to choose healthier options?

- Read the ingredients list and choose frozen fruits and vegetables that don't contain added ingredients.

Foods in the most processed category are french fries, sugary cereals and hot dogs. These are the least healthy for you because they contain a lot of added sugar, salt and unhealthy fat and have been stripped of a lot of nutrients. You should avoid eating too much of these types of foods.

One thing to note is that the way you cook and prepare your food plays a role in how healthy it is. Try cooking your food with little added salt and sugar and using healthier fats, such as vegetable oils instead of lard or butter.

Slide 6:



For dairy foods, the whole versus processed strategy is a little different. In the case of dairy foods, processing dairy-based foods can make them healthier. For example, processing whole milk to remove some of the saturated fat gives us one percent milk. As more saturated fat is removed, the milk becomes lower in total fat and calories but keeps the same amount of healthy nutrients we get from milk, such as calcium and vitamin D. However, flavoring milk by adding extra sugar makes it less healthy.

Skim and low-fat, plain milk and yogurt are recommended for anyone over two years of age as they provide calcium, vitamin A and D protein, less saturated fat and fewer calories than other dairy products.

The least healthy dairy-based foods are those with a higher fat content and with more added sugars and salt. These include ice cream, flavored yogurt and processed cheeses. You should eat these foods more sparingly.


We know that we all include at least some foods that are processed and packaged in our diets. It's impossible to avoid packaged foods in this modern world, and they can have a place in a healthy diet. Today, I'm going to give you some tools to think critically about the information available to you on packaged foods so that you can make healthier choices.

Note to facilitator:

Participants may express that they have heard conflicting information about dairy foods, saturated fat and whole milk. You can address their concerns by saying that, until more research is completed, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans still recommends that anyone two years of age or older consume low-fat or fat-free dairy.

Slide 7:



 **If short on time, do this activity as a group brainstorm instead of in pairs**

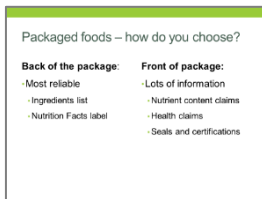
When buying packaged foods, you have to become somewhat of a detective to sort through all of the information that's available to you. I'd like to hear from you about what information you look at and use on food packages to make your choices. Turn to a person next to you and share what you do.

Let the group discuss for a few minutes. Then, invite one to two people to share what they told their partner.

Thanks for sharing. Clearly, there is a lot of information available to use on food packaging and we all have different reasons for choosing the foods we choose. Throughout today's workshop, we'll be examining the most reliable sources of information on food labels. We'll also talk about some of the other sources of information available to you and how you can use it to make your food shopping experience easier.

3. Packaged Foods – How Do You Choose? (30 minutes)

Slide 8:



A. Packaged foods

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) both share responsibility for food labeling. Everything on a label is true, but not all of it is meaningful.

The information on the back of the package is the most reliable. This includes the ingredients list and the Nutrition Facts label.

The front of the package has a whole host of additional information. Some of this is nutrient content claims, health claims and a variety of seals, certifications and graphics. This is what you first see when you're scanning the shelves of a grocery store, and it's often designed to be very eye catching. We'll talk through some of this information and help you figure out how to sort through it and pick out what is useful for you to make a healthy choice.

Slide 9:

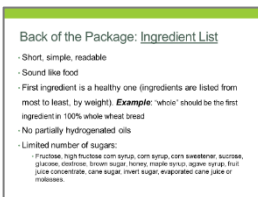


B. Back of Package Labeling

Again, the back of the package gives you the most reliable information on what is in the food you are buying. This is in the form of the ingredients list and the Nutrition Facts label. These two sources of information on the back of the package give you specific information on what is in that food.

These two sources of information are also very useful if you want to avoid, limit or increase certain nutrients or ingredients. They are also useful when comparing two products within the same food category.

Slide 10:



i. Ingredient Lists

Let's start with the ingredient list which tells you a lot about a food product.

- Ingredient lists should be short, recognizable and readable.
- Ingredients should sound like food.
- The first ingredient should be a healthy one (ingredients are listed from most to least). For example, when choosing 100% whole-wheat bread, "whole-wheat" should be the first ingredient.
- There should be no partially hydrogenated oils.
- Limit foods that have a lot of added sugars.
 - Fructose, high fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, corn sweetener, sucrose, glucose, dextrose, granulated, brown, cane and invert sugar, honey, maple syrup, agave syrup, fruit juice concentrate, evaporated cane juice and molasses can all be added sugars.

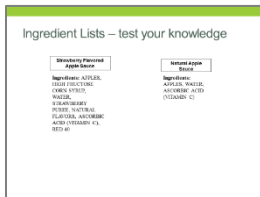
Share the additional information below for the final three bullets.

- **First ingredient is a healthy one.** When purchasing whole-wheat products, look for 100% whole on the front of the package or "whole-wheat" as the first ingredient in the ingredient list.

- **No partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs).** This ingredient is the primary source of artificial trans fat in processed foods. Research has shown that removing PHOs from processed foods could prevent thousands of heart attacks and deaths each year. There has been a decline of PHOs in food since the mid-2000s. In 2016, the FDA ruled that PHOs are no longer safe for use in foods and food companies must stop using these oils in their products. Food companies have up to three years to comply with this ruling. This means that companies can either reformulate their products without PHOs or seek permission from the FDA to use the oils in certain products. Either way, you will see a drop in the use of PHOs in foods. For now, make sure this ingredient is not in your ingredient list.
- **Limited number of added sugars.** If any of these words for added sugars are in an ingredient list that means that sugars have been added in some form. All of these types of sugars regardless of the color, shape or name contain the same amount of calories. If you want to choose a product that has little or no sugar added, watch out for these ingredients.

Slide 11:

Let's test your knowledge and compare these two ingredient lists – one is for strawberry flavored apple sauce and the other is for natural apple sauce. What do you see in these two ingredient lists that would help you make your choice? *Validate all responses.*



Slide 12:

The natural apple sauce is the better choice here.



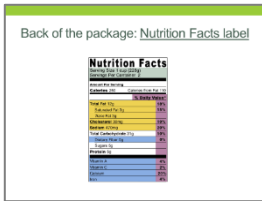
Some red flags to be aware of with the strawberry flavored apple sauce are that the list is longer than the other product's list; it contains high fructose corn syrup, a sweetener; it contains Red 40, a chemical food coloring probably added to make the product look more strawberry-like; and it has "natural flavors", a sign that there may be more processed ingredients.

In contrast, the natural apple sauce has a shorter list of only three ingredients, and we know what each of these three ingredients is (ascorbic acid, also known as vitamin C, acts as a preservative).

Use these strategies when reading ingredient lists to make healthier choices.

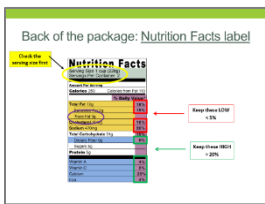
Slide 13:

ii. Nutrition Facts Label



The Nutrition Facts label is another reliable tool on the back of the package that you can use to help you make an informed and healthy choice. What are some things you look at when reading the label? *Wait for responses, then continue.*

Slide 14:



You should always check the serving size first when reading the label. If the package contains two servings (like this one) and you eat the entire package, you'll have to double all the nutrition information listed.

Once you've determined the serving size, some general rules of thumb are to:

- Choose foods that have a low percent of Daily Value (DV) for saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium. This will help ensure that the product does not have a lot of unhealthy fat and salt. Trans fat doesn't have a DV but we will talk about this in a minute.
- Choose foods that have a high percent of DV for the nutrients listed in blue and outlined in green here which are fiber and the vitamins and minerals listed at the bottom. Products with more of these nutrients present in the food will generally be the healthier option.
- Generally, low percent of DV is five percent or less and a high percent of DV is 20 percent or more.

Let's talk for a minute about trans fat. A Nutrition Facts label may legally state zero grams of trans fat if the food product contains less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving. If a product has partially hydrogenated oils in the ingredients list, it may still contain small amounts of trans fat even if the Nutrition Facts label says zero grams of trans fat. So, what is the best way to avoid artificial trans fats in your food? *Wait for responses then share:* by reading the ingredient list. The ingredient list is the true determinant of whether artificial trans fat is in your food.

Use the Nutrition Facts label and the ingredient list together to make healthier choices.

Slide 15:



C. Front of Package Labeling

i. Nutrient Content Claims

Now let's switch gears a bit and talk about the other types of information on food packaging. Like I mentioned earlier, there is a lot of information on the front of the package. It can sometimes be overwhelming and difficult to sort through. First, let's talk about the government regulated information that is reliable and trustworthy.

First we have nutrient content claims such as "sodium free", "low-fat" and "no added sugar". These claims are FDA approved and defined to mean something specific. They can help you quickly identify a healthier option on the shelf such as low-sodium canned foods or low-fat milk.

Slide 16:



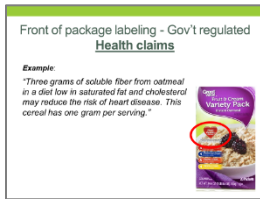
ii. Allergens

The government also regulates information that is provided about allergies in foods and gluten content of foods. These labeling regulations are particularly helpful for those with food allergies and insensitivities that are trying to avoid certain foods.

Allergy information: Since 2006, the FDA regulates labeling on food products containing any of the eight most common food allergens – milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans. This information must be clearly stated on the food label.

Gluten-free labeling: Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, rye and some cross-breads of these grains. Gluten must be avoided by people who have a gluten allergy or sensitivity to it, such as those with celiac disease. Since 2013, the FDA has approved these four terms for use by food companies who verify that their products are gluten free. The approved terms are "gluten-free", "free of gluten", "no gluten" and "without gluten". This is especially useful for consumers who need to avoid gluten. Companies may also use a gluten-free symbol on their products if they would like along with the approved wording, but no symbols are regulated or approved for use by the FDA for this purpose.

Slide 17:



iii. Health Claims

Health claims are another government-regulated source of information you might see on the front of packaging. The FDA has approved 12 specific, evidence-backed health claims that you may see on food packages. The information provided in these health claims may be useful to you, but you should always consider your entire diet and other lifestyle factors as a means of preventing disease. No one food alone will prevent any disease.

In addition to considering your entire diet and lifestyle, it's also important to think critically about what else is in the foods that bear these health claims. Let's explore that a little now.

Here is an example of a health claim:

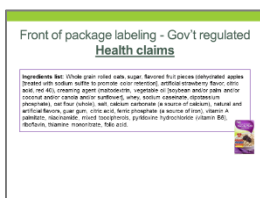
"Three grams of soluble fiber from oatmeal in a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease. This cereal has one gram per serving."

This claim is from this box of instant oatmeal which has a heart symbol that says "heart healthy" on it. A claim like this is common on cereal boxes and oatmeal and is often accompanied by a heart symbol. These are all FDA-approved claims.

What does this health claim tell you about the product? *Wait for responses.*

From this, we know that one serving of this oatmeal has one gram of soluble fiber per serving. We also know that three grams of soluble fiber from oatmeal, when consumed with a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease. But, we don't know anything else about what is in this product. Let's look at the ingredients list to find out more.

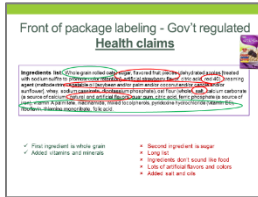
Slide 18:



Here is a list of ingredients from the instant oatmeal from the previous slide. Now that you have this information, what do you know about this product?

Discuss the ingredient list with participants for a few minutes before moving to the next slide.

Slide 19:



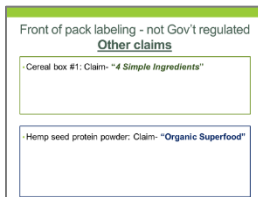
The ingredient list for this oatmeal tells us that the first ingredient is whole-grain oats—that’s good. There are a lot of added vitamins and minerals towards the end of the list. Those ingredients aren’t bad.

But, we also now know that the second ingredient is sugar which means there is likely a lot of added sugar in this oatmeal. There are also a lot of added colors and artificial flavorings, salt and added vegetable oils. Also, the ingredient list is quite long and contains a lot of words that don’t all sound like food.

Using the guidelines we reviewed on reading ingredient lists, this product may not be the healthiest choice.

Always be sure to read the ingredient list and the Nutrition Facts label to learn more about what’s in the food you are choosing. Don’t rely on health claims alone to give you the complete picture.

Slide 20:



iv. Other Claims

I mentioned that there are twelve government-regulated health claims in all. We’re now going to look at some front of package claims that are **not** government regulated.

Imagine you are at the grocery store shopping. You see two products with these claims on the front of the package. The first is a cereal box that claims to have “Four simple ingredients”. The second is a product called hemp seed protein powder in the snack aisle that claims to be an “organic superfood”.

I’d like you to take a few minutes and discuss with a couple of people nearest to you what your gut reaction would be to seeing both of these claims. *Allow about three minutes for participants to discuss amongst themselves. Then, ask for two to three participants to share what they discussed.*

Slide 21:



While these claims may make us think a product is healthy, these claims alone don’t tell you enough about these products to make an informed choice.

In the case of the cereal, you don’t know enough without looking at the back of the package to read the ingredient lists. The ingredients listed on the back of this cereal box are organic whole-grain corn, organic dried cane syrup, salt and organic molasses. What do these ingredients tell you about this cereal? *Wait five seconds for responses.* Two of these four ingredients are sweeteners

(cane syrup and molasses) and another is salt. There may be only four simple ingredients in this cereal, but they are not all healthy ingredients.

The term superfood is not defined by the FDA. It generally is used as a marketing tool by food companies to imply that the food is healthy. But it doesn't tell you anything about what is in the food – you have to read the Nutrition Facts label and the ingredient list to learn more.

These examples show how important it is to verify any front of label claims by always reading the ingredient list and the Nutrition Facts label as they are the most reliable sources of information on a food package.

Slide 22:

v. Seals and Certifications



You may also see seals and certifications on the front of the package. These often provide information about how the food is produced and where it comes from. The certifications are often value-based, meaning they provide information about the impact the production of that food has had on the environment, animal welfare and workers' rights.

Most of these seals are not government-regulated or verified. Food companies apply to have the seal placed on their food label by a third-party certifier.

One exception is the USDA organic certification. I'll talk about that certification next.

Slide 23:

Foods labeled with the USDA organic seal have been verified and certified as having been produced using approved organic methods and ingredients.



There are three levels of certification for USDA organic:

1. 100 percent organic which indicates that all the ingredients and processes used are approved as organic
2. Organic which indicates that at least 95 percent of the ingredients are certified organic
3. Made with organic ingredients which indicates that at least 70 percent of the product is made from certified organic ingredients and the remaining ingredients are produced using approved methods

Slide 24:



The non-government regulated seals provide information where government verification is lacking. Again, these seals are often based on a value outside of the nutritional content of the food. You can choose what other values are most important to you when making your food choices and use this information to inform those choices.

Because these seals are not government-regulated, the trustworthiness of the seals varies widely. It is recommended that you research the seal or value you're interested in to determine how trustworthy and rigorous the process is for the food company to receive the seal.

Here are some examples of value-based seals you may find on food products. The first seal is for foods that are verified as not having any ingredients grown from genetically-modified organisms; the second is Fair Trade Certified which ensures that all producers are paid a fair price for their products; and the third label is from the Rainforest Alliance that offers certification to farms, forests and businesses that meet rigorous environmental and social standards.

Slide 25:



vi. Recap

Let's recap all that we discussed today about reading and understanding food labels.

- Read ingredient lists and Nutrition Facts labels
 - Use them to compare foods within same category
 - Choose foods with a short list of ingredients
 - Make sure the first ingredient is a healthy one
 - Look for low sodium, sugars, saturated and trans fat
- Don't rely solely on front of package claims. Verify against information on the ingredient list and Nutrition Facts label
- Prioritize values and research third party certifiers

4. Let's Practice (10 minutes)

Slide 26:

Let's Practice: Compare two canned beans options

Use the Nutrition Facts labels to complete the chart below.

Which canned beans option is healthier and why?

Canned Beans	Nutrition Facts						Canned Beans
	Serving Size	Calories	Fiber	Protein	Sodium	% DV Sodium	
Option A							
Option B							

A. Activity

Now let's practice reading the Nutrition Facts label. Here you can see two Nutrition Facts labels for two canned beans options. Use this information to fill in the chart and compare both options to find out which one is healthier.

Draw a quick sketch of the blank chart on a sheet of paper. You can work with a partner if you would like. Let's take five minutes to complete this activity. Then we'll come back together and see which one is the healthier option.

Allow five minutes to complete. Then ask:

Who would like to share what they found out?

Invite one to two people to share their findings.

Slide 27:

Let's Practice: Compare two canned beans options

A and B have the same amount of calories, fiber and protein per serving.

But, option A has over three times more sodium than option B.

Option B is the healthier choice and is labeled as low-sodium.

	Serving Size	Calories	Fiber	Protein	Sodium	% DV Sodium
A	½ cup	130	6 grams	8 grams	430 mg	17%
B	½ cup	130	6 grams	8 grams	135 mg	6%

Based on our comparison of the two Nutrition Facts labels, option B is the healthier choice.

As you can see from the completed chart, a half-cup serving of canned beans from options A and B gives you the same amounts of calories, protein and fiber. But, option A has over three times more sodium than option B. You can see this by looking at the milligrams of sodium listed on the label and by looking at the percent DV listed for sodium.

The sodium intake recommendation for adults is 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day. High dietary sodium is a concern because it can increase blood pressure in both children and adults. High blood pressure can increase the risk for heart disease and stroke. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the US and in NYC.

To keep your sodium intake low, choose products with around five percent DV or less for sodium. Option B falls within that range and is labeled as low-sodium canned beans.

This activity was a great example of how you can use the Nutrition Facts label to compare two foods within the same category to help you make an informed choice. What other food categories would this be helpful for?

Accept a few responses from the group.

5. Closing (5 minutes)

Slide 28:

A. Resources



To support you in making changes to your diet, here are some resources that are available to you.

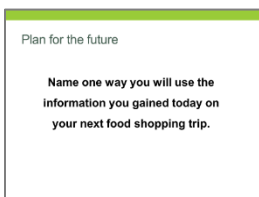
You can visit the New York City Health Department's website at nyc.gov/health to get more materials and information. If you search for healthy eating, you will find links to materials including the Healthy Eating and Active Living Guide, a variety of recipes and handouts.

If you search for farmers markets, you will find information about how and where to access local produce. Shopping at farmers markets is a healthy and delicious way to eat more whole fruits and vegetables. Farmers market maps available on the website will also show you the locations of onsite nutrition education workshops and cooking demonstrations that take place at select markets from July through November.

The USDA also has a variety of healthy eating resources available at choosemyplate.gov including daily tips, handouts and recipes.

Slide 29:

B. Paired share activity

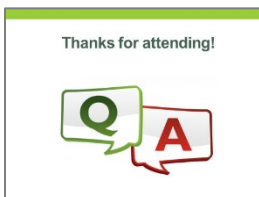


Now take a minute to make a plan for the future. Talk with your neighbor and name one way you will use the information you gained today on your next food shopping trip. Be specific and name how you will use this new information to make healthier food choices.

Allow two minutes for participants to discuss among themselves.

Slide 36:

C. Questions



Thank you so much for attending. I hope this workshop has addressed some of the questions you have about reading and understanding food labels and resources to help you make healthier food choices. Before we wrap up, what are your questions?

Sources:

- 1) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. 8th Edition. December 2015. Available at <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/>.
- 2) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Food and Drug Administration. Food. Labeling and Nutrition. Available at <https://www.fda.gov/Food/LabelingNutrition/default.htm>. Accessed March 2017.
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- 5) The Non-GMO Project. Available at <https://www.nongmoproject.org/>. Accessed March 2017.
- 6) Fair Trade Certified. Available at <https://www.fairtradecertified.org/>. Accessed March 2017.
- 7) Rainforest Alliance Certified. Available at <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/faqs/what-does-rainforest-alliance-certified-mean>. Accessed March 2017.