

- Children—nutrition / Food—caloric content

Eight tips for using food labels to keep kids healthy

THE new year offers a great opportunity for parents to foster healthier eating habits for their children and the entire family. This is especially important after the holiday season, which features family gatherings with meals that are often more fatty, sugary, and processed.

However, the holiday season isn't the only time children consume excessive amounts of sugar and unhealthy fats. Many parents unknowingly allow these dietary patterns to persist throughout the year.

Children are eating fewer fruits and vegetables while consuming more sugary, salty, and fatty foods, making balanced nutrition even harder to achieve.

In the Philippines, the number of overweight children — those weighing more than what's healthy for their height and age — has almost tripled since 2003. Obesity is even more concerning, with a weight that is far above the healthy range, thus increasing the risk of problems like diabetes. Both overweight and obesity levels in the country are already considered "high" by global standards.

Health experts and the UN child rights agency Unicef are advocating for the government to introduce front-of-package nutrition labels — simple symbols on food packages to quickly show if a product is high in sugar, salt, or unhealthy fats.

While mandatory front-of-package nutrition labels are being pushed, parents can still make smart choices by checking food labels at the back of every product.

Here are tips that can help parents make smarter picks at the grocery store:

1. Start with the serving size. The serving size tells how many servings each product contains and how many grams or pieces is considered as one serving. Take note that nutritional information will be based on just one serving.

For example, the label might say "four cookies" but a typical three-year-old child only needs about 1,350 calories daily. If one serving (four cookies) contains 160 calories, and a child eats eight cookies (160 calories per serving x 2 servings = 320) for the day, that's already almost one-fourth of the daily energy needs.

2. Check the calories. This number shows the energy a child gets from each serving.

Here's a quick guide to the daily caloric needs of children based on their age: those aged 1 to 3 years typically require 920 to 1,000 kcal, while children aged 4 to 6 years need

around 1,200 to 1,400 kcal. For 7 to 9-year-olds, the recommended intake is 1,400 to 1,800 kcal, and children aged 10 to 12 years generally require 1,800 to 2,200 kcal. Teenagers aged 13 to 18 years have different needs, with boys requiring 2,000 to 2,600 kcal and girls needing 1,800 to 2,000 kcal daily.

While having a snack is okay, keep in mind their other meals for the day. For example, serving eight cookies is already equivalent to 320 calories, which may be fine for a teenager but may be too much for a four-year-old.

3. Limit unhealthy fats, added sugar, and salt. Fats, sugar, and salt are fine in small amounts but should stay low to prevent unhealthy weight gain.

Opt for snacks with less than 5g of saturated fat, 10g of added sugar and 200mg of sodium per serving.

4. Don't just check the amount of fats, also the type. Some food labels list "calories from fat," or how much of the total energy in one serving comes from fats.

For instance, if a snack has 160 calories per serving, and 70 come from fats, nearly half might not have come from healthy sources.

When it comes to fats, the type of fat is just as important as the amount. Healthy fats, like those from nuts, fish and seeds, are important for brain development and energy. They can even protect against unhealthy saturated fats, often found in fried or processed foods. The World Health Organization recommends keeping saturated fats

under 10% of daily calories and avoiding trans fats entirely to keep a child healthy.

5. Check the ingredients list. Watch out for hidden sugars in the ingredients list. Often, these are called "sucrose" or "corn syrup."

Take note, as well, that the ingredients are listed in descending order of weight. This means that the first one or two ingredients mentioned in the list are the ones that make up the largest portion of the product.

6. Look for good nutrients. Children need fiber, vitamins, and minerals (like iron and calcium) to grow strong and healthy. While some snacks add these nutrients, it's best to find foods that naturally have them, like fruits and whole grains.

For instance, children 4 to 6 years old need 300 mg of calcium and 10mg of iron daily. So, if a product offers at least 10 to 20-percent of these daily requirements, it's a helpful addition to the kids' meals.

7. Check the footnote. The footnote explains the "Percent Daily Value (% DV)," which is based on an adult's daily nutrient needs. While children need fewer calories, parents can still use the DV to estimate the amount of nutrients in a product.

8. Try balancing the Percent Daily Value. It shows how much one serving of the product provides toward specific daily need of calories or certain nutrients. Aim for high percentages (20-percent or more) in nutrients like fiber, calcium, and iron, but keep sugar, salt, and fat low (5-percent or less). If a snack has 25-percent DV of sugar, it might be too sweet for younger kids, so consider a healthier alternative.

Nutrition Facts
Serving Size 4 Cookies (32g)
Servings Per Container About 8

Amount Per Serving		% Daily Value*	
Calories	160	Calories from Fat 70	
Total Fat	8g		12%
Saturated Fat	5g		25%
Trans Fat	0g		
Polyunsaturated Fat	1g		
Monounsaturated Fat	1g		
Cholesterol	0mg		0%
Sodium	125mg		5%
Total Carbohydrate	22g		7%
Dietary Fiber	less than 1g		3%
Sugars	10g		
Protein	1g		
Vitamin A	0%	Vitamin C	0%
Calcium	0%	Iron	4%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:
Calories: 2,000 2,500

Total Fat	Less than 65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than 20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g
Dietary Fiber	25g	30g

1 Start here
2 Check calories
3 Limit these nutrients
4 Get enough of these nutrients
5 Check the footnote
6 Quick guide to % Daily Value: 5% or less is LOW 20% or more is HIGH

A product's food label is a handy guide to help parents choose healthier options for their children. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO/CJ PERADILLA, UNICEF PHILIPPINES