WORDS TO EAT BY

Food labels no longer read like alphabet soup.

For more than 20 years, consumers who read the labels on their soup, cereal, and other processed foods have been forced to decipher tables of information detailing grams of unpronounceable minerals and vitamins and percentages of recommended daily allowances based on hard-to-measure serving sizes.

Well, all that changed May 8 with the official implementation of the United States Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) new food labeling regulations.

No more notations about riboflavin, niacin, and other obscure-sounding B vitamins—the FDA says we're getting plenty of those. Instead, the new labels offer practical nutritional information for better dietary planning.

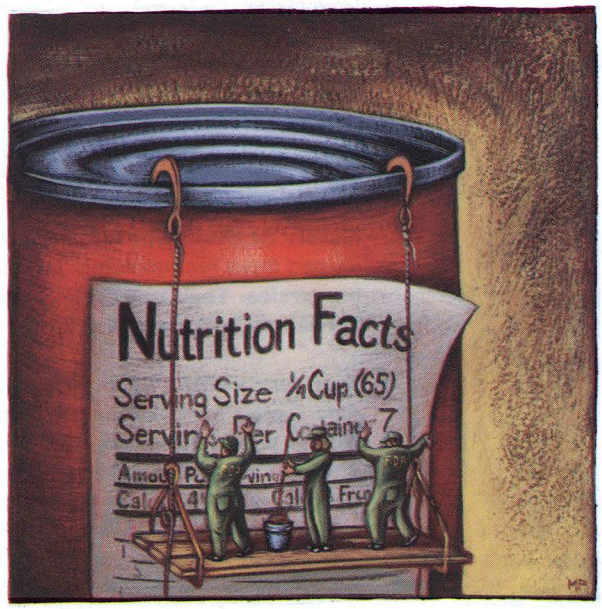
We talked to two nutrition professors in the College for Human Development, Lois Schroeder and Sarah Short. They clarified how to read the new labels and explained why they're so much better than the ones we've lived with for years.

"The FDA took a totally different approach," says Schroeder, director of SU's dietetics program. "The new labels relate more directly to consumer concerns."

And those concerns deal with the correlation between diet and health.

"Labels will contain a lot less information, but more about cholesterol and fat, which is important to decrease your risk for coronary disease," says Short. In other words, information people can use.

Consumers should note several key differences on the labels.



MICHAEL PRINZO

1. In place of recommended daily allowances, the labels now outline daily reference values and reference daily intakes.

The daily reference values indicate how much fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, dietary fiber, sugars, and protein the products contain. For example, a product might have 5 grams of fat, which equals 8 percent of the total daily value recommended for fat. Likewise, the same product could have 470 milligrams of sodium, or 20 percent of the daily value for sodium.

"Most of these nutrients didn't have a recommended daily allowance," says Short. "Now you're shown both what you should have and what the product contains."

The reference daily intake is akin to the familiar recommended daily allowance, but lists only the vitamins and minerals the FDA feels are most important: vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron.

On all the new labels, values and intakes are based on a 2,000-calorie daily diet. Depending on your caloric needs, the amounts may be higher or lower than what appears on the label.

The labels also contain footnotes showing the total daily values for nutrients that should be consumed in both 2,000- and 2,500-calorie diets, common calorie intakes for adult women and men.

2. The serving sizes have changed and they're now closer to the amounts of food people really eat.

"This is the very best thing about the new labeling system," says Short. "In the past, manufacturers could say a little bag of chips would feed 20 people and have the percent of calories down very low per serving size."

Serving sizes are now established by the FDA and manufacturers can no longer manipulate them.

3. Labels can tout the health benefits of products. If a product has a high percentage of a specific nutrient, the manufacturer can now promote it.

However, Short advises consumers that such claims shouldn't be taken as gospel. For example, a high-calcium intake may help prevent osteoporosis in white and Asian women later in life. The key word here is "may."

Such useful information, however, educates the public about which types of foods and nutrients most benefit specific health concerns. "That kind of information can be very helpful," says Schroeder, "particularly for vegetarians looking for alternative sources for some of these nutrients."

With the new labels, says Schroeder, "consumers can make their own judgment calls. It's putting more power back in the hands of the consumer, which is a good thing. If people are going to make intelligent food decisions, they now have the tools to do it."

—*ANDREA C. MARSH*

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