

How to Read Food Labels Like a Gut Hero



Create Microbiome Magic Every Day –
Even When You Eat Out of a Package!

by Elisa Song, MD

YOUR MICROBIOME AND YOU



Did You Know That?

You have trillions of tiny microscopic friends inside your belly called PROBIOTICS? They live in our gut microbiome.

Our microbiome helps us stay healthy and happy by:

- Talking to our immune system to keep us from getting sick. And when we do get sick, they help us get better faster! Over 70% of our immune system is in our microbiome!
- Sending messages to our brain to keep us happy, calm and focused! Our microbiome makes over 90% of our happy brain chemical called serotonin, which helps us manage our worries, feel calm, and fall asleep easier. And it makes at least 50% of our dopamine, which helps us pay attention and stay focused whenever we need.

Our Microbiome Champions

Our Microbiome needs us to feed them MICROBIOME CHAMPIONS, so that they can keep US healthy and happy!

- **FIBER:** fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (lentils, beans), nuts and seeds
- **PHYTONUTRIENTS:** the color in plant-based foods. Every color matters!
- **FERMENTED FOODS:** Loaded with with prebiotics to feed our microbiome, probiotic, and amazing health compounds called postbiotics!

**We Need Our Microbiome,
And They Need Us!**

WHY READ FOOD LABELS LIKE A GUT HERO?



Microbiome Mischief Makers

Microbiome Mischief Makers lurk in packaged **ULTRAPROCESSED FOODS**

Ultraprocessed foods:

- Hurt our immune system and cause chronic inflammation. They increase the risk of many chronic diseases including diabetes, obesity/overweight, heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and even some cancers.
- Harm our brain and increase the risk for anxiety, depression, ADHD, behavior problems, and cognitive decline.
- Wreak havoc on our gut microbiome!

Reading Food Labels Like a Gut Hero helps you:

- Learn to choose foods that help your microbiome and you stay healthy, happy and strong – even when you eat out of a package!
- Find Gut Hero swaps that your kids can enjoy when they're out with friends – that make you, your child, and their microbiome happy!



Gut Hero Tip

Read labels together when grocery shopping – even with your babies and toddlers! The more we talk about choosing foods with the most nourishing ingredients for our bodies, brains, and microbiomes, the easier it will be for kids to do the same when they're older!

Everyone Can Be a Gut Hero!

How to Read Food Labels like a Gut Hero!

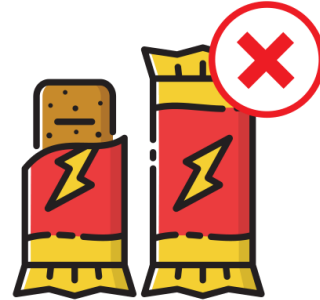
Be a Gut Hero
Food Label Detective



Skout Organic Strawberry Jam Kids Snack Bar



Turn the Package Over



Kellogg's Nutri-Grain Soft Baked Strawberry Breakfast Bar

Nutrition Facts	
1 serving per container	
Serving size	1 bar (24g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	90
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 2g	3%
Saturated Fat 1.5g	8%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 10mg	0%
Total Carbohydrate 16g	6%
Dietary Fiber 2g	7%
Total Sugars 10g	
Includes 0g Added Sugars	0%
Protein 2g	4%
Vitamin D 0mcg	0%
Calcium 20mg	2%
Iron 0.7mg	4%
Potassium 150mg	4%
* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.	
Ingredients: Organic Dates, Organic Strawberries, Organic Coconut Milk Powder, Organic Sunflower Seed Protein Powder, Organic Cocoa Butter, Organic Strawberry Essence, Organic Lemon Juice Concentrate. Contains: Coconut.	



Look at Serving Size and how many servings in each container

Nutrition Facts	
1 servings per container	
Serving size	1 bar (37g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	130
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 3.5g	4%
Saturated Fat 0.5g	3%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 140mg	6%
Total Carbohydrate 25g	9%
Dietary Fiber 1g	5%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 12g Added Sugars	24%
Protein 2g	
Vitamin D 0%	Calcium 130mg 10%
Iron 1.8mg 10%	Potassium 80mg 0%
Vitamin A 10%	Thiamin 10%
Riboflavin 10%	Niacin 10%
Vitamin B6 10%	Zinc 10%
* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.	
Ingredients: Crust: Whole Grain Oats, Enriched Flour (Wheat Flour, Niacin, Reduced Iron, Vitamin B1 [Thiamin Mononitrate], Vitamin B2 [Riboflavin], Folic Acid), Soybean Oil, Whole Wheat Flour, Sugar, Dextrose, Fructose, Calcium Carbonate, Vegetable Glycerin, Invert Sugar, Salt, Whey, Soluble Corn Fiber, Wheat Bran, Cellulose, Natural Flavors, Potassium Bicarbonate, Mono-And Diglycerides, Soy Lecithin, Wheat Gluten, Niacinamide, Vitamin A Palmitate, Carrageenan, Zinc Oxide, Reduced Iron, Guar Gum, Vitamin B6 (Pyridoxine Hydrochloride), Vitamin B1 (Thiamin Hydrochloride), Vitamin B2 (Riboflavin), Filling: Invert Sugar, Corn Syrup, Strawberry Puree Concentrate, Vegetable Glycerin, Sugar, Modified Food Starch, Vegetable Juice For Color, Sodium Citrate, Sodium Alginate, Citric Acid, Natural Flavors, Dicalcium Phosphate, Methylcellulose, Malic Acid. Contains wheat, milk and soy ingredients.	



Look at Dietary Fiber



Look at Added Sugar



Read the Ingredient List



1

Turn the Package Over

The only purpose of the front of the box is to:

GET YOU
(or your kids)
to LOOK!

Gut Hero Tip

Don't be fooled by front-of-the-box claims trying to trick you into thinking a food is healthy, like:

“Gluten-free”
“Made with real fruit”
“No artificial ingredients”
“Made with whole grains”
Added vitamins and minerals”
“High fiber”
Low fat”

Turn the box right over and read the back like a Gut Hero!



2

Look at Serving Size

Figure out how many
SERVINGS
of product you/your
child will eat or drink

Gut Hero Tip

The Nutrition Facts Label tells you how many calories and how much of each nutrient is present in the package. Determine how many servings of product you or your child will actually eat or drink, and multiply the calories and nutrients on the label by that number.

For example, if you have a 16-ounce bottle of Pom Wonderful 100% Pomegranate Juice, you would notice that the bottle contains 2 8-ounce servings. Each 8-ounce serving has 34 grams of Total Sugars. So if you, like most, plan to down the entire 16-ounce bottle of pomegranate juice in one sitting, you would have had 2 servings of juice with a whopping 68 grams of Total Sugar in one fell swoop.

Serving size is NOT a recommendation for how much you should eat or drink. It lists the amount the average person typically has at one time - which is often too much!



3

Look at Dietary Fiber

Calculate the
Carbohydrate
-to-Fiber
ratio



Gut Hero Tip

Products with at least 2.5 grams of Dietary Fiber per serving can claim to be a “good source of fiber. Foods with at least 5 grams, can claim to be “high fiber.”

The carbohydrate-to-fiber ratio may be even more important.

Aim for a carbohydrate-to-fiber ratio of 10:1 or less.

Example:

Wonder bread has 29 grams of Total Carbohydrates, and 3 grams of dietary fiber. The ratio of carbohydrates-to-fiber is $29 \div 3 = 9.67$.

That’s a little too close to 10 for my comfort. Dave’s Killer Bread’s Organic 21 Whole Grains and Seeds bread with 22 grams of total carbohydrates and 5 grams of dietary fiber has a carbohydrate-to-fiber ratio of 4.4. Much better!

Look beyond
“high fiber” to the
Carbohydrate-
to-fiber ratio!



4

Look at Added Sugar

Figure out how many
GRAMS of
ADDED SUGAR
you/your child will eat
or drink

Gut Hero Tip

The maximum recommended added sugar daily by age is:

- Adult men: no more than 36 grams
- Adult women: no more than 25 grams
- 2-18 years: no more than 12-25 grams depending on age
- Under 2 years: ZERO grams

Calculate the total number of grams of added sugar your child will eat/drink by taking the grams of added sugar per serving and multiplying by the number of servings they'll have.

The FDA does not require fruit purees in the Ingredient List to be counted as Added Sugar on the label, but as a Gut Hero, you know to add this to your total sugar count.

Fruit juice is 100% of the sugar from fruit without any fiber, and should be also be counted as sugar in your daily count, even though the FDA does not consider this as "Added Sugar" when drank alone, as in the Pom juice example above.



5

Read the Ingredient List

Read the Ingredient List to sleuth out any
**MICROBIOME
MISCHIEF
MAKERS**

Gut Hero Tip

There are over 3,000 FDA-approved Food Additives, many of which wreak havoc on our microbiome, and our children's developing gut-brain and gut-immune system connections.

Make it a habit to read Every. Single. Label so you and your kids can learn how to quickly and easily sleuth out any ingredients that may cause microbiome mischief, and:

Put it right back on the shelf!

The following pages explain the DOs and DON'Ts of reading the ingredient list and sussing out any Microbiome Mischief Makers!

Learn more in
Chapter 5 of
Healthy Kids, Happy Kids: An Integrative Pediatrician's Guide to Whole Child Resilience



5

Read the Ingredient List

- ✓ There should be as few ingredients as possible. The longer the list, the more likely the food is loaded with Microbiome Mischief Makers.
- ✓ Ingredients are listed in the order of highest to lower content in that food. The top 3 ingredients should be ingredients that you would be happy for your child to consume.
- ✓ If you see the word “artificial,” put it back.
- ✓ If you can’t pronounce an ingredient or have to Google what it is, think twice about buying it. See the next page for my list of my top No-No’s for what Microbiome Mischief Makers to especially avoid.
- ✓ Beware of “natural flavors” unless it’s organic or you know the source.
- ✓ Look for sugar and all of its codenames listed in my book. High-fructose corn syrup is always a hard no, but seeing multiple sugar posers should be a warning to put that package back on the shelf.
- ✓ Say “no” to artificial sugar substitutes (Saccharin, Aspartame, Acesulfame potassium (Ace-K), Sucralose, Neotame, Advantame). Stevia and monk fruit (Luo Han Guo) are a maybe.
- ✓ Choose organic when possible. Look for the USDA Organic Seal and at the very least “Made with organic ingredients” claim. And if not possible, avoid non-organic foods on the Environmental Working Group’s Dirty Dozen list.
- ✓ Say “no” to highly-refined, inflammatory vegetable and seed oils (refined = ultra-processed), including canola oil, corn oil, soybean oil, sunflower oil, safflower oil, cottonseed oil, grapeseed oil, peanut oil, “vegetable” oil, margarine and shortening. Say “yes” to extra-virgin or virgin, cold-pressed or expeller-pressed, organic olive oil, avocado oil, coconut oil, or nut and seed oils.

Learn more in
Chapter 5 of
Healthy Kids, Happy
Kids: An Integrative
Pediatrician’s Guide
to Whole Child
Resilience



5

Microbiome Mischief Makers to Avoid in the Ingredient List

Just say “NO!” to the following FDA-approved food additives. They have known harmful effects on the gut microbiome, brain, and/or immune system:

- ✘ Preservatives: Sodium Benzoate, Sodium Nitrite, BHA, BHT, TBHQ, propyl paraben, propyl gallate
 - ✘ High-fructose corn syrup
 - ✘ Artificial Sweeteners: saccharin, aspartame, sucralose, acesulfame potassium (acesulfame-K), neotame
 - ✘ Artificial Color Additives: FD&C Blue Nos. 1 and 2, FD&C Green No. 3, FD&C Red Nos. 3 and 40, FD&C Yellow Nos. 5 and 6, Orange B, Citrus Red No. 2
- Flavors: Artificial flavor (and potentially “Natural flavor” unless you know the source)
- ✘ Flavor Enhancers: Monosodium glutamate (MSG), disodium guanylate or inosinate
 - ✘ Emulsifiers/Stabilizers: Mono- and Diglycerides, Carrageenan, Polysorbate 80 and other “Polysorbates,” Sodium Carboxymethyl Cellulose (CMC or cellulose gum), Glycerol Monostearate. NOTE: Natural gums are a maybe – Xanthan gum has cautions for use in premature babies, but Guar gum, Gum Arabic (or Acacia gum) and Locust Bean Gum (or Carob gum) may actually provide benefits to our gut microbiome. The jury is out – so consume these in moderation.
 - ✘ Aluminum (technically not a food additive, but be sure to check your baking soda and packaged pancake/waffle, muffin, cornbread, or other baking mixes for sodium aluminum phosphate)

Learn more in
Chapter 5 of
Healthy Kids, Happy
Kids: An Integrative
Pediatrician’s Guide
to Whole Child
Resilience





CONGRATULATIONS, GUT HERO!

You're on your way to creating Microbiome Magic for a lifetime of healthy, happy brains, bodies, and immune systems! Be sure to learn how to create even more Microbiome Magic every day in my book:

Healthy Kids, Happy Kids:
An Integrative Pediatrician's Guide to Whole Child Resilience

xo Elisa Song, MD



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