Pocket Guide to Understanding the Food Nutrition Facts Label

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this guide is to help you read labels and make the best food choices for your kidneys.

Purchased foods come in different forms. As an example, tomatoes can be bought fresh or made into a sauce, soup, condiment, or juice.

When foods are processed, they often contain added ingredients. Any packaged item has a food label. It is important to read food labels to be aware of added ingredients that may impact your health.

In this guide we cover important nutrients to watch as part of your diet with kidney disease.
Food labels on packaged foods include a Nutrition Facts table and a list of ingredients.
Serving size is at the top of the Nutrition Facts table.

This is the quantity used to determine the numbers in the table. **BEWARE:** the serving size may not be the quantity you should be eating.

**DO THE MATH:** if you usually eat twice the serving size, you will have to double the numbers written on the food label: 160 mg (milligrams) of sodium would therefore become 320 mg.

When comparing different products, don’t forget to compare serving sizes! E.g., you need to compare the Nutrition Facts of 1 cup of product A with 1 cup of product B.
Choose foods with **less than 200 mg** (milligrams) per serving or up to **600 mg** for a meal type item. A diet high in sodium (salt) can increase blood pressure, cause your body to keep more fluid, and can also make you feel thirsty.

Just because foods do not taste salty does not mean they are low in sodium. For example, baked goods are often high in sodium.

Processed foods often contain added sodium. This is the biggest contributor of dietary sodium to our diets.
Phosphorus is not often in the Nutrition Facts label but that does not mean the food does not contain phosphorus. Look for hidden phosphorus as a food additive (“phos”) in the ingredients.

Phosphorus is a mineral needed for bone health but too much can be harmful with kidney disease.

Avoid foods with phosphorus additives because they are so easily absorbed.

Phosphorus is not naturally found on food labels and is only 40 to 60% absorbed.

Inorganic phosphorus is added when foods are processed. Foods with phosphate additives should be limited because almost 100% is absorbed.
Potassium is a mineral that is essential for heart health but too much of it can be dangerous for people with kidney disease. Each person’s kidney diet is individualized. You may need to limit potassium while others may not.

If you are limiting potassium in your diet, choose foods with less than 200 mg per serving or up to 600 mg for a meal type item. Compare similar products side by side and choose the lower potassium food.

**CAUTION:** All food labels contain % DV (Daily Value) for potassium. Foods with less than 2% DV may be listed as 0 mg of potassium per serving. This does not mean the food contains no potassium. In fact, it may contain up to 93 mg of potassium per serving and add up quickly depending on the portion you eat.

* For more information visit the AAKP’s “Are You O-K+” campaign in recognition of National High Potassium Awareness Day (every May 1st). [www.areyouo-ko.org](http://www.areyouo-ko.org)
Try to limit eating foods with potassium additives. As part of a low potassium diet, avoid ingredients containing the word “potassium”, such as potassium lactate, potassium chloride and potassium phosphate. All foods should include the amount of potassium per serving on the label.

Ingredients in foods are listed in the order of their total amount. Ingredients first on the list are found in higher amounts than ingredients listed last.

Many phosphorus and potassium additives can be found in processed foods. Reading the ingredient list can help to find foods with these additives.

Try to limit phosphorus additives. Avoid ingredients containing “phos” in their name, such as phosphoric acid, sodium phosphate, etc.

Ingredients in foods are listed in the order of their total amount. Ingredients first on the list are found in higher amounts than ingredients listed last.
Look for foods with less sugar and more fiber.

Total carbohydrate is the total amount of starch, fiber and sugar in a food.

Total sugars include those that are naturally occurring and those that have been added to foods.

Added sugars tells you the amount of sugar that has been added during processing.

Carbohydrates are a source of energy for your body.

Fiber has many health benefits. It can keep your bowels regular, slow down the speed your body absorbs sugar and lower your cholesterol level.

If you have diabetes, eating foods high in sugar can make managing blood sugars difficult. High blood sugars can damage your kidneys.
NUTRITION CLAIMS

Some foods have special regulated claims about what nutrients or health benefits you might get from eating that food.

Even if a food has a claim, it is important to look at the label and judge for yourself whether it is a good choice for you.

Claims about sodium are especially important. When it says on the package “no salt added” check the list of ingredients to make sure potassium chloride has not been added to replace sodium chloride.

When a product has “reduced sodium” or is “lightly salted” you should still check the Nutrition Facts table to see how much sodium it contains per serving.
As part of a healthy diet with kidney disease, cooking with unprocessed or minimally processed foods is usually the best option. If choosing packaged foods, read the food label to make the best choices for you.
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