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HOW long do you spend deciding and choosing what to buy when you shop for groceries at the supermarket?

Do you read the labels on a packaged food before buying it? What are the main information on the food label that you look for, especially when trying out a new product?

A trip to the supermarket can be daunting, with all the different choices and offers on the endless rows of shelves and aisles.

Some people prefer to take the easy route and pick whichever products are on sale or those they are familiar with.

However, there is a smarter (and healthier) way of shopping for groceries by using the nutrition information on the labels of food packages to guide you. Making the time to read such information allows you to obtain useful information on the nutritional value of the products and figure out which are the best choices for what you need.

The following are the main nutrition information found on packaged foods that can help you to make smart and informed food choices:

Nutrition Information Panel (NIP)

The NIP is a table found on the label of packaged foods showing the amount of calories and major nutrients contained in the product.

When comparing different brands of similar type of foods, do refer to the energy and nutrient contents per 100g or 100ml of the product.

Do not compare nutrition information based on the serving size because different products may use different serving sizes.

On the other hand, the content per serving is useful to provide information on the amounts of calories and nutrients you will get

Choosing nutritious food



A Health Ministry officer shows the energy icon on a box in this filepic, indicating that the contents contain 120kcal, which is 6% of an average daily diet of 2,000 kcal.

from one serving.

Look at the carbohydrate, protein and fat content, and decide if the amounts are suitable for what you and your family need.

You may also obtain information on the content of other nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre, if listed in the NIP.

Nutrition claims

There are two types of nutrition claims.

Nutrient content claims describe the level of a particular nutrient in a food product.

Examples of common nutrient content claims include "high in fibre", "high in calcium", "low in sugar", "low in fat" or "cholesterol free".

Meanwhile, nutrient function claims describe the role of specific nutrients in the growth, development and normal functioning of the human body.

Examples of nutrient function claims

include "Protein helps build and repair body tissues" and "Calcium aids in the development of strong bones and teeth".

These claims, together with the NIP, can guide you in making smart food choices.

Energy icon

The energy icon is a type of Front-of-Pack (FOP) label found on food packaging.

It provides information on the amount of energy (kcal) in one serving of the product and the percent contribution of that amount of energy to the average daily energy requirement of an adult (based on an average 2,000 kcal diet).

The icon is able to quickly alert you to foods with high energy content.

The percentage contribution to daily energy intake can be a rough guide to help you keep track of your daily energy intake.

Maintaining your weight requires a balance between the amount of energy you consume and the amount of energy you expend in physical activity and the processes of your body.

Healthier Choice Logo (HCL)

This logo is awarded to foods and beverages that meet certain nutritional criteria set by the Health Ministry and are deemed "healthier" within their particular category.

Take note that it does not mean that a food with the HCL is a "healthy" food. Do not choose products solely based on the HCL logo.

You should refer to the NIP to accurately determine the nutrient content in the product and choose those with better nutritional value.

List of ingredients

All pre-packed food products have an ingredient list on the label, where the ingredients are listed in order of the weight, from the most to the least.

If whole grains such as wholegrain wheat, oat or barley are listed among the first few ingredients, then the product contains a high proportion of wholegrains.

Likewise, if sugar, or similar terms such as sucrose, glucose, fructose or corn syrup, are listed among the first few ingredients, then the product is high in sugar.

Some foods such as juice and jam may naturally contain high amounts of naturally-occurring sugar.

Some processed foods are high in salt or oil as shown in the ingredient list, and it is advisable to limit the intake of these foods.

Nutritional value should be the main priority when choosing food products, rather than price, taste, brand or other factors.

In general, products with lower calories, sugar, salt and fat are the better option.

Conversely, products with higher protein, vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre are considered healthier.

Use the nutrition information available on food labels to help you identify these products. Be a discerning consumer.

Make time to look out for these nutrition information the next time you go grocery shopping.

Dr Zaitun Yassin and Dr Roseline Yap are with the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM). This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia 2019, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by NSM, the Malaysian Dietitians' Association and the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity. NMM will be organising a Food-Fit-Fun Fair at IOI City Mall, Putrajaya, on April 17-21.