



## Understanding Nutrition Labels

The Nutrition Facts Label is required on most packaged food products in the United States under FDA regulations. It is designed to provide consumers with critical information about the nutrient content of food and beverages.

### Key Components of a Nutrition Label

- ❖ Serving Size: Standardized to help consumers compare products.
- ❖ Calories: Total energy per serving.
- ❖ Nutrients: Includes:
  - ❖ Macronutrients: Fat (total, saturated, trans), carbohydrates (total, fiber, sugar), and protein.
  - ❖ Micronutrients: Sodium, vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium (mandatory).
  - ❖ % Daily Value (%DV): Indicates how much a nutrient in a serving contributes to a daily diet based on 2,000 calories/day.

### FDA Regulations for Nutrition Labels

Under the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) of 1990 and subsequent updates, the FDA regulates food labeling to ensure transparency. Here are key points:

### Mandatory Disclosures

- Companies must list the following on nutrition labels:
  - Calories
  - Total Fat (including saturated and trans fat)
  - Cholesterol
  - Sodium
  - Total Carbohydrates (including dietary fiber and sugars)
  - Protein
  - Vitamins/Minerals: Vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium are required.
  - Ingredients List:
    - All ingredients must be listed in descending order by weight.
    - This includes additives, preservatives, and other components.

## The Loophole: Companies Don't Always Disclose Everything

While the FDA requires transparency, several loopholes exist that allow companies to omit or hide ingredients:

### “Proprietary Blends”

- Companies can group ingredients under a proprietary blend without specifying individual amounts.
- Example: “Herbal Energy Blend (Ginseng, Green Tea Extract, Guarana)”—the consumer doesn't know how much of each ingredient is included.
- This is common in supplements, protein powders, and functional foods.

### “Natural Flavors” and “Artificial Flavors”

- ❖ Natural Flavors can include a mix of hundreds of chemicals derived from natural sources (plants or animals).
- ❖ Companies are not required to disclose the individual components of “flavors” as long as they are generally recognized as safe (GRAS).
- ❖ Example: A product can contain MSG, solvents, or other additives under the umbrella of “natural flavors.”

### “Incidental Additives”

- ❖ Ingredients that are present in trace amounts and have no functional or technical effect in the final product do not have to be listed.
- ❖ Example: Processing aids, such as anti-caking agents or solvents, are often excluded.

### GRAS Ingredients

- The Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS) rule allows companies to self-determine that an ingredient is safe without FDA approval.
- Companies are not required to notify the FDA when using GRAS ingredients.
- This loophole allows undisclosed ingredients to enter food products.

### Supplements and Labeling

- Dietary supplements fall under DSHEA (Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act) and have less stringent regulations.
- Companies are not required to prove safety or efficacy before marketing a supplement.
- The FDA does not verify the accuracy of supplement labels unless a post-market issue arises.

### Ingredients Often Hidden Under Loopholes

- MSG (Monosodium Glutamate): Often hidden under terms like “yeast extract” or “natural flavors.”
- Artificial Sweeteners: Aspartame, sucralose, and acesulfame potassium may not be clearly labeled.
- Carrageenan: Used as a thickener, it can cause inflammation but is often labeled as

“natural.”

- Chemical Solvents: Used in processing but excluded from labels.
- Heavy Metals: Found in supplements and protein powders but rarely disclosed.

### **FDA's Role in Enforcing Transparency**

- The FDA can take action against companies that mislabel or hide harmful ingredients.
- However, enforcement is reactive, not proactive.
- Many companies operate under the assumption that they will not be audited.

### **Clean Label Movement**

To address these concerns, the clean label movement has gained traction:

- ❖ Clean Labels emphasize transparency, using recognizable, natural ingredients.
- ❖ Brands voluntarily disclose all ingredients and avoid “proprietary blends” or vague terms like “natural flavors.”

### **Consumer Tips to Navigate Labels**

- Read the Ingredients List: Look beyond the nutrition facts.
- Avoid Proprietary Blends: Choose brands that disclose exact ingredient amounts.
- Watch for Buzzwords: “Natural,” “healthy,” and “organic” do not guarantee transparency.
- Look for Third-Party Testing: Especially for supplements.
- Research “Natural Flavors”: When in doubt, contact the manufacturer for clarification.

While the FDA requires companies to provide nutrition facts and ingredient lists, loopholes allow for incomplete disclosure, especially under terms like “proprietary blends” and “natural flavors.” This lack of transparency can mislead consumers and hide potentially harmful substances.

In functional medicine, advocating for clean labels and educating clients on how to interpret food and supplement labels is essential to ensure they make informed decisions for their health.