



# Reading Nutrition Labels for Better Oral Health

## How to Understand Food Labels and Make Tooth-Friendly Choices

### Why Read Nutrition Labels?

Nutrition labels provide valuable information about the foods and beverages you consume. Learning how to read them can help you identify products that are high in added sugars, which are a major contributor to tooth decay.

Making informed food choices supports not only your oral health but also your overall health.

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## Why Sugar Matters

Bacteria in the mouth feed on sugars from foods and drinks.

As they digest these sugars, they produce acids that:

- Weaken tooth enamel
- Increase the risk of cavities
- Contribute to enamel erosion over time

Reducing frequent exposure to added sugars helps protect your teeth.

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## Where to Find Sugar on the Label

One of the most important sections of the Nutrition Facts label is "**Added Sugars.**"

This tells you how much sugar has been added during processing.

Foods with little or no added sugar are generally a better choice for your teeth.

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# Total Sugars vs. Added Sugars

Nutrition labels list both:

## Total Sugars

This includes:

- Naturally occurring sugars
- Added sugars

For example, milk naturally contains lactose, and fruit naturally contains fructose.

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## Added Sugars

Added sugars are introduced during processing or preparation.

Examples include:

- Table sugar
- Corn syrup
- Honey
- Brown sugar
- Cane sugar
- Maple syrup
- Agave syrup

Reducing added sugars is an important step in cavity prevention.

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# How Much Added Sugar Is Too Much?

The **Dietary Guidelines for Americans** recommend limiting added sugars to **less than 10% of total daily calories**.

Consuming less added sugar benefits both oral and overall health.

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# Don't Forget the Ingredient List

Manufacturers may use different names for sugar.

Look for ingredients such as:

- Sucrose
- Glucose
- Fructose
- Dextrose
- Maltose
- Corn syrup
- High-fructose corn syrup
- Cane sugar
- Brown sugar
- Molasses
- Honey
- Agave nectar
- Maple syrup

If several forms of sugar appear near the top of the ingredient list, the product may contain a significant amount of added sugar.

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## Compare Similar Products

Nutrition labels make it easier to compare foods.

For example:

Instead of choosing the first yogurt you see, compare several brands.

One may contain:

- 2 grams of added sugar

while another contains:

- 15 grams of added sugar

Small differences can add up over time.

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## Watch Serving Sizes

Nutrition labels list nutrients **per serving**, not necessarily per package.

If a package contains two servings and you eat the entire package, you consume **twice** the amount shown on the label.

Paying attention to serving size helps you better estimate your sugar intake.

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## Be Careful with Drinks

Many beverages contain surprising amounts of added sugar.

Examples include:

- Soft drinks
- Sweetened coffee beverages
- Sweetened teas
- Sports drinks
- Energy drinks
- Fruit-flavored beverages

Water and unsweetened beverages are generally better choices for oral health.

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## What About "Natural" Sweeteners?

Products sweetened with:

- Honey
- Maple syrup
- Agave nectar
- Coconut sugar

still contain sugars that oral bacteria can use to produce acids.

Although some may have different nutritional properties, they should still be consumed in moderation.

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## Tooth-Friendly Shopping Tips

When shopping:

- Compare labels before buying.
- Choose products with less added sugar.
- Select unsweetened dairy products when possible.
- Choose whole fruit instead of fruit snacks.
- Drink water instead of sugary beverages.
- Limit sticky processed snacks.

Making small changes consistently can reduce your risk of cavities.

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## **Nutrition Labels and Children's Oral Health**

Children are especially vulnerable to frequent sugar exposure.

Parents can help by:

- Reading labels together.
- Choosing lower-sugar snacks.
- Limiting sugary drinks.
- Encouraging water between meals.

Healthy habits established early often continue into adulthood.

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## **Common Myths**

**"If a product is labeled 'organic,' it must be low in sugar."**

**False.**

Organic products may still contain significant amounts of added sugar.

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**"Fruit-flavored snacks are the same as fruit."**

**False.**

Many fruit snacks contain added sugars and do not provide the same nutritional benefits as whole fruit.

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**''No added sugar' means sugar-free.'**

**False.**

Foods labeled "no added sugar" may still contain naturally occurring sugars.

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## Key Takeaways

- ✓ Reading nutrition labels helps you identify hidden sources of added sugar.
  - ✓ Added sugars increase the risk of tooth decay.
  - ✓ Compare similar products to choose lower-sugar options.
  - ✓ Pay attention to serving sizes as well as sugar content.
  - ✓ Water and whole foods are generally better choices for oral health.
  - ✓ Healthy food choices, combined with good oral hygiene, help protect your teeth for life.
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## References

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