

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

How to use the '5-20' rule for healthy choices

I've never been a fan of Nutrition Facts labels, but a friend recently mentioned that she reads them all the time, using something called the "520 rule." What is the 520 rule?

Ah, she was talking about what is known as the "5-20 rule," and it applies to the Daily Value percentages that are listed on the label.

Basically, it's just a quick guideline to use when you look at those percentages to determine how a food might fit into your daily dietary goals.

Any nutrient listed as 5 percent or less of the Daily Value is considered low. Any listed as 20 percent or more of the Daily Value is considered high.

For nutrients you want to limit, such as saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium, try to choose foods with low Daily Value percentages. Foods with 5 percent or less would be great choices, while it would be smart to limit foods with 20 percent or more.

For nutrients you want to get enough of, such as fiber, vitamins A and C, calcium, and iron, look for foods with 20 percent or more of the Daily Value. A food with 5 percent or less of the Daily Value for those nutrients simply isn't a good source of them.

By now, you are probably wondering, "What the heck is a Daily Value?" Simply put, the Daily Value is a generic nutrient-intake standard based on a 2,000 calorie-a-day diet. For key nutrients, the Nutrition Facts label provides percentages of the Daily Value that a serving of the food contributes toward the daily total.

In reality, daily nutrient recommendations depend on your age and gender. However, it's not practical to have different food labels for each individual group, so Daily Values are used instead. Still, it could be important for you to know where your needs vary.

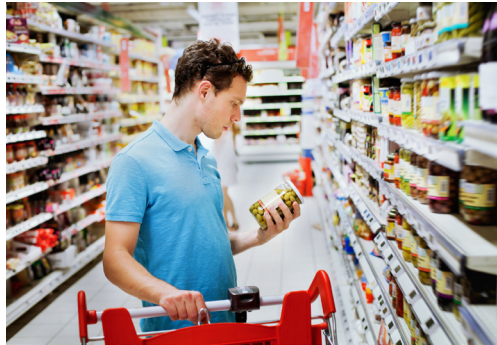


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For example, the Daily Value for calcium is 1,000 milligrams, so a food with 300 milligrams of calcium in it would have a Daily Value percentage of 30 percent. But teenagers need 1,300 milligrams of calcium a day, and women 51 and older and men 70 and older need 1,200 milligrams a day. So, even if you consume 100 percent of the Daily Value of calcium, you still might not be getting enough.

Sodium is similar. The Daily Value for sodium is 2,400 milligrams, but that might be too much for some people, especially those with hypertension.

Daily Value percentages aren't listed for everything on the label. For example, you won't see a percentage for trans fats, because, basically, there is no level of trans fat that's recommended for consumption. You should keep it as close to zero as possible.

Also, a Daily Value percentage for protein is listed only when a food makes some type of claim for protein, such as a high-protein breakfast bar. In those cases, the percentage is based on a total Daily Value level of 50 grams of protein a day.

Once you start examining the Daily Values, you can find yourself getting lost in a bit of a rabbit hole. But you don't need to know all the nitty-gritty to make them useful. Just use the percentages — and the 5-20 rule — to make comparisons between foods to help you make the best choices.

July 15, 2016

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Irene Hatsu, specialist in Food Security with Ohio State University Extension.

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