Think about the foods you regularly purchase at the grocery store. Are there more than five ingredients on the label? Would having a better understanding of how to read food labels support you and your nutrition goals?

Often, you'll find that the healthiest foods don't have (or need) labels. Usually, these options can be found along the outer edge of the grocery store — that's where the vegetables, fruits, fish, meat and dairy items are.

At some point, though, you probably will need to venture into the center aisles of the store, where all the canned foods, frozen foods, cooking oils and spices are found. This is where all the junk and processed foods live, too. Don't panic — reading food labels will help you choose the most nourishing options, stick to your healthy-eating plan and support your overall well-being.

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The ingredients in packaged and processed foods can be hard to understand — or even pronounce. But you can increase your label literacy by following these tips:

- **Choose foods with very few ingredients.** Most whole foods have only one or two ingredients. If the list is two, three or more lines, it's probably a processed food.
- **Don't be duped by the claims on the package.** Read only the Nutrition Facts and the ingredients — most of the other content is just marketing.
- **Learn to recognize hidden items.** Unfamiliar ingredients with suffixes such as “-ose,” “-ide,” “-ate,” “-ole,” “-ite” and “-ene” often are preservatives, sugars, colorings and artificial flavorings. Often, the label will call attention to these ingredients by listing their purpose — for example, “used as a preservative.” If you can't imagine the ingredient in nature, or you can't pronounce it, it likely is something you don't want to eat!
- **Be selective.** If any of the first three ingredients include refined grains, some version of sugar or hydrogenated oils, you can be sure the product is unhealthy.
- **Choose natural.** The healthiest foods have ingredients you can imagine growing or living in nature.
- **Check your serving size.** Often, the serving size on the label doesn't equal the amount you typically eat.

**Feeling a little overwhelmed?** Just stick to the basics. Remember, if you can't read it, you probably shouldn't eat it!