**What to look for on a nutrition label**

Since nutrition labeling became mandatory in 2005, many people have started to take advantage of this extra information and be proactive about their health. As a parent, reading labels for yourself can be confusing enough. You might look for things like sodium for your high blood pressure, or fat content for your waist line or cholesterol levels. But should you be looking for different things for your children? This partly depends on the age of your child. Do you know what to look for on a nutrition label for your kids?

For children, there are certain nutrients that are of concern:

**Sodium (salt):** young children (under the age of one year) are not recommended to have foods that are high in salt (such as deli meats) because their kidneys aren’t fully developed and extra sodium puts extra stress on them. Unfortunately, many processed and packaged foods are very high in salt, including snack crackers and soups. For young children it’s best to limit their intake of processed and packaged foods.

**Fat:** Unlike adults, young children should not be on a low-fat diet. Children under 2 should be drinking full-fat (3.25%) milk and eating full-fat yogurt. As children get older you can switch them to lower fat dairy products. However, just like adults, intake of unhealthy fats (saturated and trans) should be limited. Try to avoid trans fats from processed and packaged foods altogether.

**Fibre:** Whether it’s adults or kids, fibre is always a good thing. High fibre foods fill you up faster and slow the release of sugar into the blood, which helps control hunger and blood sugar levels. Fruits and vegetables are always high in fibre. For cereals and other foods, look for 3-4g of fibre per serving. However, if your child has a small appetite, fills up easily, or is underweight, you may actually want to limit high fibre foods in favour of getting your child to eat more Calories. Speak to your physician or dietitian if you are concerned with your child’s growth or appetite.

**Iron:** Iron is especially important for young children under the age of one and those that don’t like a lot of meat. Iron will be listed as a percentage daily value (DV) which can make things confusing. If you’re child doesn’t eat a lot of meat, look for high iron foods with more than 15% DV for iron. Good non-meat sources of iron are: iron-fortified cereals, beans (kidney, pinto, navy, etc) and lentils, such as chickpeas.

**Sugar:** Excess sugar intake in children and adults can lead to unhealthy weight gain. Many processed and packaged foods have tons of sugar added to them. Check the ingredient list for words such as “high-fructose corn syrup”, “glucose”, “sucrose”, and “syrup”. These words mean “sugar”. The best way to avoid added sugar is to cook as much as you can from scratch, but sometimes convenience foods win out. When grocery shopping, look for items where sugar is not in the first 5 ingredients on the list.