

# How To Read Food Labels – Cheat Sheet

## Quick Food Label Tips for Parents of Special Needs Children

### 1. Look Out for Hidden Sugars

- Sugar can appear under **many names**, such as:
  - *High-fructose corn syrup, cane juice, maltose, dextrose, agave nectar, brown rice syrup*
- **Tip:** If sugar (by any name) is in the **first 3 ingredients**, skip it.

## How to Read Nutrition Labels for Sugar & Carbs

1. **Look at the “Total Carbohydrate” line** (usually bolded):
  - This shows **total carbs per serving**, including fiber and sugars.
2. **Check “Total Sugars”** (under carbs):
  - This includes **naturally occurring sugar + added sugars**.
3. **Look for “Added Sugars”** (separate line, if on newer labels):
  - Shows how much sugar was added during processing (goal: as low as possible).
4. **Check the Ingredient List:**
  - Ingredients are listed by amount (most to least). If sugar or any of its many aliases are near the top, the product has a lot of sugar.
5. **Serving Size:**
  - Compare the nutrition facts to the serving size. Smaller packages may list smaller servings, so watch total carbs for what your child will actually eat.

## Quick Tips

- Aim for products with **less than 5 grams of total sugar per serving**, ideally with no or very low added sugars.
  - If possible, pick items with **fiber** to help balance carbs.
  - When in doubt, go for **whole foods** like fresh fruit, veggies, nuts, and plain yogurt instead of packaged snacks.
  - Use apps or online resources to scan barcodes and check sugar content quickly.
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### 2. Watch Out for Refined Carbs

- Refined carbs spike blood sugar and can lead to mood swings and behavioral issues.
- **Avoid:** *Enriched wheat flour, white rice, corn starch*
- **Tip:** Choose whole grains and fiber-rich foods instead.

### 3. ✕ Avoid Artificial Additives

Children with autism, ADHD, or sensory processing issues may react to:

- **Artificial colors:** Red 40, Yellow 5, Blue 1
  - **Preservatives:** BHA, BHT, TBHQ, sodium benzoate
  - **Flavor enhancers:** MSG, “natural flavors” (can be vague and chemical-based)
  - **Tip:** If it sounds like a chemistry experiment, it’s likely not good.
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### 4. ▶ Label Pitfalls to Avoid

- “Natural” is **not regulated** and can still include additives.
  - “Low-fat” often means **more sugar or artificial ingredients**.
  - **Watch serving sizes** – sometimes a small package has multiple servings.
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### 5. The Golden Rule: Fewer Ingredients = Better

**Aim for foods with fewer than 5 total ingredients.**

If you can’t **pronounce it**, or you wouldn’t cook with it at home, skip it.

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### 6. Choose Healthy, Whole Food Fats

Healthy fats are **essential for brain development, mood regulation, and hormone balance**—especially important for special needs children.

**Look for:**

- **Real butter** (not margarine)
- 🔍 **Ghee** (clarified butter, often tolerated better by sensitive kids)
- 🐄 **Beef tallow**
- 🐷 **Lard** (from pasture-raised pork if possible)
- 🧀 **Real, full-fat cheeses**

These fats:

- Contain **fat-soluble vitamins** (A, D, E, and K2)
- Support **myelin** (the protective coating around nerves)
- Help the body absorb nutrients more efficiently
- Provide steady, clean **fuel for the brain** without blood sugar spikes

**Avoid:** Industrial seed oils like canola, soybean, corn, and safflower oils, which are high in inflammatory omega-6s.

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## 7. 📋 Quick Label Reading Checklist

- Less than 5 ingredients
- No added sugars or artificial sweeteners
- No artificial colors, flavors, or preservatives
- Recognizable, whole-food ingredients
- Contains healthy fats (not seed oils)

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## 8. 🧠 Why This Matters

Children with special needs are often **more sensitive** to food ingredients. Artificial additives, excess sugar, and inflammatory oils can worsen:

- Behavior and focus
- Sleep and mood
- Gut health and immune function

**Fueling the body with real, nourishing food gives the brain what it needs to thrive.**