



SOURCING GUIDE · LABELS

A practical guide to reading every supplement facts line

This guide is for careful buyers who want to compare two jars without trusting the front label. After reading it you will be able to work through any Supplement Facts panel in under ten minutes.

- **Start here**
Serving size sets every number below it.
- **Weigh this**
The weight is the nutrient, not the source compound.
- **Price truth**
Price per serving shows what the jar really costs.

By Holly Rasmussen · Updated Sep 30, 2026 · 10 min read

CONTENTS

01	Start at the top: serving size and servings	05	Handle proprietary blends without a per ingredient dose
02	Read dietary ingredients, amounts and forms	06	Compare cost and check seals, lots and claims
03	Make sense of percent daily value	07	The checklist
04	Decode the other ingredients line	08	Sources and further reading

Two jars can look the same on the front and read very differently on the back. One lists forms and weights you can compare, the other hides doses inside a blend and fills space with front label words. Once the back panel makes sense, comparison takes minutes and marketing takes up less room.

01

Start at the top: serving size and servings

The panel opens with the fact that changes every number below it. The Food and Drug Administration states that serving size reflects the amount people typically eat or drink and is not a recommendation of how much to eat or drink. All nutrient amounts and calories on the label refer to the size of that serving, so two servings means doubling calories, nutrients and percent Daily Values.

A food example makes the arithmetic plain. In the FDA sample lasagna label, one serving is 1 cup with 280 calories and four servings in the package would be 1,120 calories. Supplement math works the same way, only the unit changes. Under 21 CFR 101.36, serving size for dietary supplements must use a term appropriate for the form, such as tablets, capsules, packets or teaspoonfuls.

Look for two lines together at the top of the panel. Supplement Facts panels must include names and quantities of dietary ingredients, serving size and servings per container, with an exception when quantity and servings information overlap. Under the same rule, Servings Per Container need not be listed when it is stated in the net quantity of contents declaration. A jar that says 60 capsules with a serving size of 2 capsules already tells the count, even if the servings line is missing.

How to work it in under a minute

Read the form term first, then the number. Note whether a serving is 1 capsule, 2 tablets, 1 packet or 1 teaspoonful. Check servings per container or derive it from net contents. Multiply every amount on the panel if the daily routine uses more than one serving. Keep that multiplied amount in mind for the rest of the read, because dose, blend weight and price per serving all follow from it.

The law behind this layout is older than most jars on the shelf. DSHEA in 1994 defined dietary supplements, added specific labeling requirements and provided for optional labeling statements. FDA implemented DSHEA labeling rules on September 23, 1997 for statement of identity, nutrition labeling, ingredient labeling and claims. The panel has looked stable since then, which helps comparison across brands and years.

02

Read dietary ingredients, amounts and forms

The middle of the panel lists what the maker counts as dietary ingredients. Dietary ingredients include vitamins, minerals, amino acids, herbs or other botanicals, other dietary substances, and concentrates, metabolites, constituents, extracts or combinations. Each one should show a name, a weight and a unit in Amount Per Serving.

Form matters as much as weight. A Supplement Facts panel can list the source form of an ingredient such as folic acid and the plant part, while a Nutrition Facts panel cannot. Parentheses often carry that detail. Calcium as calcium carbonate, magnesium as magnesium oxide, or vitamin C as ascorbic acid each point to a specific source material behind the nutrient name. Under 21 CFR 101.36, allowed synonyms include Vitamin C as ascorbic acid, thiamin as vitamin B1, riboflavin as vitamin B2, and calories as energy. When two jars list different forms, the comparison is no longer weight against weight alone.

Weight needs one more translation. Under 21 CFR 101.36, quantitative amounts by weight must represent the weight of the dietary ingredient rather than the weight of the source, such as calcium rather than calcium carbonate. The number refers to the nutrient itself. That rule keeps labels consistent, but it also means the powder in the capsule weighs more than the listed amount whenever the source compound carries extra mineral salts, waters of hydration or carriers.

Units deserve a pause. Milligrams, micrograms, grams and International Units do not convert by sight. You can compare prices later only with matching units such as mg versus mg. Copy the unit exactly when notes are taken, especially for vitamin A, vitamin D and vitamin E where older and newer labels may differ in convention.

FROM THE EDITORS

Supplement Facts panels cannot list zero amounts, while Nutrition Facts panels must list zero amounts of nutrients. Under 21 CFR 101.36, vitamins and minerals present at less than 2 percent of the Reference Daily Intake are amounts that can be declared as zero and shall not be declared. Absence from the panel means little or none for labeling purposes, not proof of absence from the formula.

03

Make sense of percent daily value

Percent Daily Value sits in the right column and invites quick judgment. Treat it as a labeling reference, not as personal advice. High and low values help rank jars against each other. They do not set intake for a specific person without health professional advice.

Two quirks shape what appears in that column. First, Supplement Facts panels omit zero amounts and very low amounts, as noted above. A nutrient present at less than 2 percent of the Reference Daily Intake stays off the panel. Second, percent values scale with serving size. Because all amounts refer to the stated serving, doubling the serving doubles the percent Daily Values as well. A panel that looks modest at 1 capsule may look high at a 2 capsule serving.

Use the column for sorting, not deciding. When two jars list the same ingredient in the same form and unit, the higher percent value signals more of that nutrient per serving. When forms differ, pause before ranking, since form affects how ingredients compare in ways the panel alone does not resolve. When a value seems high enough to matter for total intake from food and other products, maker records, lot testing and professional advice carry more weight than the panel.

The panel also carries limits that matter. It cannot approve products, and absence of a warning or presence of a facility statement does not mean no risk. Whether a higher percent Daily Value is appropriate for a specific person stays outside what the label can show.

04

Decode the other ingredients line

Below the dietary ingredients sits a separate list, often in smaller type. Other Ingredients are non active components including fillers, binders, disintegrants, lubricants and glidants, coatings, and flavors and texture modifiers. FDA requires dietary supplement labeling to include a descriptive

name stating it is a dietary supplement, maker packer or distributor name and place of business, ingredient list and net contents. The Other Ingredients list is part of that ingredient disclosure.

Length alone says little. Other Ingredients can serve real functions such as flow, binding, disintegration, coating, stability and taste, so a long list does not by itself prove low quality. Capsule shells, tablet binders that hold powder under pressure, lubricants that keep high speed equipment running, coatings that control moisture, and flavors that make powders drinkable each answer a manufacturing need. A short list does not by itself prove higher quality either. Some sellers and commentators warn that excipients may cause allergies, affect dissolution, add bulk or lack full transparency, so purpose matters more than count.

Read the line for function rather than fear. Gelatin or vegetable cellulose usually forms the capsule. Cellulose, starch or dicalcium phosphate often adds bulk or structure. Magnesium stearate or silicon dioxide often aids flow. Waxes, shellacs or polymers often coat tablets. Colors and flavors adjust appearance and taste. Where the label names a grade, such as a specific starch or coating, record it. Remember that individual excipient weights are not required where the label gives no amount, which limits how far comparison can go.

Front label phrases need documents behind them. Words like no fillers may describe one formula choice but do not disclose the function of the ingredients that remain. The Other Ingredients list, the lot number and third party paperwork show more than the claim.

05

Handle proprietary blends without a per ingredient dose

Blends are where comparison gets harder. In a proprietary blend, the weight of the blend and every ingredient within the blend must be disclosed, but not the amount of each ingredient within the blend. Proprietary blends may be labeled as blend, complex, matrix or proprietary formulation, with only the total combined amount given and ingredients in descending order by weight. The exact dose of any single ingredient inside such a blend, when only total blend weight is listed, is something the evidence does not show.

This pattern is common. As of April 2022 in the NIH Dietary Supplement Label Database, 34 percent of labels listed dietary ingredients in blends and 21 percent listed them in proprietary blends. A reader who meets several botanicals grouped under one total weight is therefore reading a normal industry practice, not an anomaly.

What to check when doses are grouped

Find the blend name and its total weight first. Confirm that every ingredient within the blend is named. Confirm order, since ingredients must appear in descending order by weight. Note which ingredient leads and which trails, because the first ingredient dominates the blend even

when its exact milligrams stay hidden. Treat stimulant blends with extra caution, since grouped amounts prevent dose comparison, intake estimates and trial dosing checks.

Proprietary blends protect formulas but hide individual doses, which limits dose comparison, intake estimates and trial dosing. That trade off belongs in the buying decision. When dose matters for comparison between two jars, the jar with per ingredient weights allows math that the blended jar does not. When the maker publishes lot level certificates or third party details that quantify blend components, that paperwork narrows the gap.

FROM THE EDITORS

Structure function claims describe the role of a nutrient intended to affect normal structure or function, require a disclaimer that FDA has not evaluated the claim and that the product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent disease, and the maker must submit proof to FDA within 30 days of marketing. Read that disclaimer as a statement about review status, not as a comment on whether the product works.

06

Compare cost and check seals, lots and claims

Price comparison starts after dose is clear. Price per unit can be compared by entering price, servings per container and units per serving, with matching units such as mg versus mg. The manual version needs only two divisions. Divide jar price by servings per container to get price per serving. Then divide by units per serving to get price per mg or gram. Compare identical units only.

An example keeps the steps honest. A 30 dollar jar with 30 servings costs 1 dollar per serving. If each serving lists 500 mg of the ingredient of interest, the cost is 2 dollars per gram. A cheaper jar with a smaller serving weight can cost more per gram, and a larger jar with more capsules per serving can cost more per day. Blends break this math at the second step, since per ingredient units are missing and only total blend weight is given.

Paperwork comes next. Look for third party seals, lot numbers, maker name and address, and structure function disclaimers. FDA does not approve dietary supplement facilities or manufacturers and there is no official FDA Approved seal for products. A seal that suggests otherwise misleads. A lot number ties the jar to a batch and to any certificate of analysis the maker can provide. The full safety and quality history of a specific jar cannot be known from the panel alone without lot testing, maker records or third party certification details.

Front claims close the loop. Structure function wording must carry the FDA disclaimer noted above. Identity, net contents and contact details must appear under labeling rules. When any of those marks are missing, or when the seal cannot be verified with the named certifier, set the

jar aside until the maker supplies documents. Traceable jars earn the shelf. Opaque jars wait.

07

The checklist

- ☐ Copy serving size with its form term
 - ☐ Confirm servings per container or net contents
 - ☐ Multiply all amounts for the servings used
 - ☐ Record each dietary ingredient name and unit
 - ☐ Record the form in parentheses for each nutrient
 - ☐ Check that weights refer to nutrient weight
 - ☐ Note percent Daily Value only for comparison
 - ☐ Read Other Ingredients for function, not length
 - ☐ Flag blends, complexes, matrixes and proprietary formulas
 - ☐ Check blend ingredients run in descending order
 - ☐ Divide jar price by servings for price per serving
 - ☐ Divide by matching units for price per mg or gram
 - ☐ Find maker name, address, lot number and seals
 - ☐ Verify disclaimers and reject FDA Approved seals
-

Sources and further reading

- [How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label · fda.gov](#)
- [Dietary Supplement Labeling Guide · fda.gov](#)
- [Perspectives on the Use of Proprietary Blends in Dietary Supplements · pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](#)
- [How to Read Dietary Supplement Labels · labelsunwrapped.org](#)
- [Proprietary blends: What does this mean? · opss.org](#)
- [21 CFR 101.36 – Nutrition labeling of dietary supplements. · ecfr.gov](#)

For information only, not medical advice. Statements about supplements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration, and no product here is intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease. Ask a doctor or pharmacist before starting a supplement, especially if you are pregnant, nursing or taking medication.



WRITTEN BY

Holly Rasmussen

Holly looks after the brands Seed to Capsule works with and makes sure every sponsored page is marked as one. She spent five years buying raw materials for a natural foods retailer in Colorado, which is where she learned to ask for the paperwork first.
