

How in the World Do You Pick a Nutrition Bar?

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Have you ever felt overwhelmed and confused when trying to choose a nutrition bar at the grocery store? There are so many brands and types! Clients tell me they invariably end up grabbing one because they like the name, it “looked” nutritious or they heard from a friend it is a “good” one. What kinds of things should we look at on the nutrition facts label to determine whether or not a particular nutrition bar is a good choice for our nutritional needs?

Let’s start with the types of nutrition bars available. There are basically four types as follows:

- 1. Energy bars:** (may be known as power bars or sports bars) The original PowerBar (trade name) was designed for marathoners as a quick, energy-boosting snack that could be eaten literally on the run. Nowadays, nonathletes are gobbling them up as a grab and go snack. A typical energy bar has around 200 calories, 20 grams of carbohydrates, 15 grams of protein and 5 grams of fat.
- 2. Protein bars:** These are basically an energy bar with extra protein. The protein content usually ranges from 16 grams – 35 grams. They may also have extra fat to enhance the flavor so be sure to check the label. Aim for the ideal, which is around 5 grams of total fat or less.
- 3. Diet or weight-loss bars:** These types of bars vary nutritionally depending on what “diet” they are suppose to support. For instance, Zone bars have about 210 calories and adhere to the Zone Diet formula of 40% of calories from carbohydrates, 30% from protein and 30% from fat.
- 4. Meal-replacement bars:** Typically, these are the nutritional equivalent of a low calorie meal, which is around 250-400 calories, 30 grams of carbohydrates, 15-20 grams of protein, 5-10 grams of fat and various vitamins and minerals.

Knowing the types will help in choosing the bar that matches your nutritional needs best. First, decide what purpose this bar is suppose to serve. Is it an easy, nutritious snack, an energy-booster for a physical activity or is it meant to be a meal replacement? Here are the components to focus on when reading the nutrition facts label:

- **Calories:** When you look at overall calories, see if you have a meal replacement or a true snack. Calories greater than 250 qualify as a meal.
- **Protein:** Bars with 16 grams or more of protein fall into the “protein bar” category. The average American gets plenty of protein in their daily diet and don’t need additional protein. Usually the bars with higher protein are designed for people trying to increase protein in their diets to rebuild muscle or the protein is higher because it is a meal replacement bar.
- **Carbohydrates:** Always look at the total carbohydrate count and *not* the net carb count. There are many bars that have 20-45 grams of carbs. In “real” food terms, one serving of carbs is 15 grams. Try and visualize what the nutrition bar is replacing. For example, if you eat ½ cup of rice, pasta, or cooked oatmeal, that is the equivalent of about 15 grams of carbohydrates. So if a high-carbohydrate bar has 45 grams, that is equivalent to 1 ½ cups of rice, pasta, or cooked oatmeal. If

you aren't trying to gain weight, higher carbohydrate bars are not a good choice, especially if you have minimal daily activity.

- **Fat:** This nutrient varies widely among the choices of bars. Try and find a bar that has fewer than 5 grams of fat per bar. Often, saturated and trans fats (bad fats) are added to the bars to improve their flavor and shelf life but remember, these fats are damaging to your heart health. Ideally, you want to aim for less than 1 gram of saturated fat (if any) and no trans fats at all. Even though the label may say "0 grams of trans fats" it may not be so. The only way to know for sure is to look under ingredients and check to see if the word "hydrogenated" is listed. If you find it, the product contains trans fats. The manufacturer only has to show trans fats on the label if it is greater than 0.5 grams.
- **Sugar:** The amount of sugar varies widely among nutrition bars. The lower the better. If a bar contains any type of fruit, you can bet the sugar content will be higher just because fruit contains sugar. So it is necessary to pay attention to whether the sugar is "added" or it comes from the ingredients in the bar like fruit, which is natural and not "added" sugar. Choose bars without added sugar if possible. Also, choose bars without high fructose corn syrup.

Nutrition bars can make excellent choices for everyone's dietary needs. They are convenient, fairly economical, travel well and can help you boost your nutrition. Just be sure to understand what purpose the nutrition bar will be serving in your diet and read the labels carefully.