

Understanding Food Labels

Armed with the best intentions to eat healthily cryptic food labels can sometimes make this hard work. Food labelling is strictly governed by law but we still need to know what all the information means in order for us to make a more educated choice. Bear in mind that it is the information that is not on the label that you should be equally concerned about.

Remember that vast sums of money are invested into marketing food products and it can be clever marketing that gets us to believe something is healthy when in reality it is far from that. Money is also spent on celebrity endorsements in an attempt to win our trust or appeal to children.

Fortifying foods with vitamins and minerals does not make an unhealthy product healthy and nutritious, beware of claims such as "with added vitamins", "extra iron", "added goodness"; consider why they need fortification.

Look out for.

Hydrogenated Fat:

Found in many baked goods; cakes, biscuits, pastries, some ready meals and margarines. Hydrogenation chemically changes oil to make it solid and in the case of margarine spreadable straight from the fridge. These fats are harmful as the body cannot use them and they can interfere with the utilisation of essential fats.

Claims:

- Low / reduced fat - Foods labelled as low in fat usually have more sugar, sweeteners and additives to improve the flavour and palatability.
- High fibre
- Reduced sugar / Low calorie / Reduced sodium

Sugar:

There are many forms of sugar, be aware of hidden ones commonly found in innocent looking products such as cereals and cereal bars, some of which may contain 3 or 4 types of sugar.

- Dextrose
- Honey
- Glucose-syrup
- Maltodextrin
- Sucrose
- Fructose
- Glucose
- Maltose
- Molasses

Carbohydrates are the preferred fuel source of our brains and bodies, our intake should be made up of complex carbohydrates; those that are broken down slowly therefore providing sustained energy. On the other hand simple or refined carbohydrates need little digestion therefore can upset the amount of sugar in the bloodstream leading to cravings, weight gain, mood swings and energy dips.



Continued Overleaf →

Allergy Advice:

From November 2005 labels on pre-packed foods (including alcohol) will have to state if they contain any of 12 items that can trigger a reaction due to an intolerance or allergy.

- Gluten-containing grains: barley, rye, oats and wheat.
- Celery.
- Crustaceans, e.g. crab, lobster.
- Eggs.
- Fish.
- Milk.
- Nuts.
- Peanuts.
- Sesame seeds.
- Soyabeans.
- Sulphur Dioxide and Sulphites (over 10mg per kg or litre); preservatives in food and drink.

Lite / Light:

There is no law governing the use of these words, they are used to imply that the products contain less fat or calories than similar foods, to verify this check the content per 100g with the regular version. Lite or light can even refer to the texture.

Additives & Preservatives:

Their function is to make food look more attractive, taste more appealing and increase storage and shelf life. Some are used to improve the texture, help dough rise and provide a more satisfying mouth feel. It is estimated that we eat approximately 4kg of food additives.

What you need to know.

Ingredients are listed in descending order; the greatest first. The exception is yoghurt where the main ingredient milk is not listed.

Nutritional Information:

This is a lot		This is a little
20g	Fat	3g
5g	Saturated fat	1g
3g	Fibre	0.5g
0.5g	Sodium	0.1g
10g	Sugars	2g

Source: Use your label – Making sense of nutrition information, MAFF, 1996

Best Before:

Display Until is for shop staff, look for “best before” or “use by”, this doesn’t mean the food will be harmful after the stated date, but the flavour, texture and taste may start to deteriorate. Do not eat eggs past the “use by” date.

Fresh:

Produce sold within a short time after production/harvesting, or fruits or vegetables that are unprocessed. It can also be used emotively, “oven-fresh”, “garden-fresh” or “ocean-fresh”.

Natural:

Natural and not made with man-made ingredients.

Pure:

Mainly used on single ingredient food or to highlight the quality of an ingredient, e.g. “pure butter” indicating the use of butter and not blended fats.

Homemade:

Prepared in a domestic kitchen not a factory or manufacturer’s kitchen.

