

Reading food labels



Food packaging includes labels stating ingredients, nutritional, and allergy information but they can be confusing. What are the main features of a food label and what information is the most important?



Ingredients

1

If you have a food allergy or intolerance, the ingredients list is the first place you should look. Some manufacturers use 'allergy advice boxes' or put common allergens in bold to highlight this information, but it's best to read the ingredients list thoroughly if you do have an allergy.^{2,3}

Carbohydrates

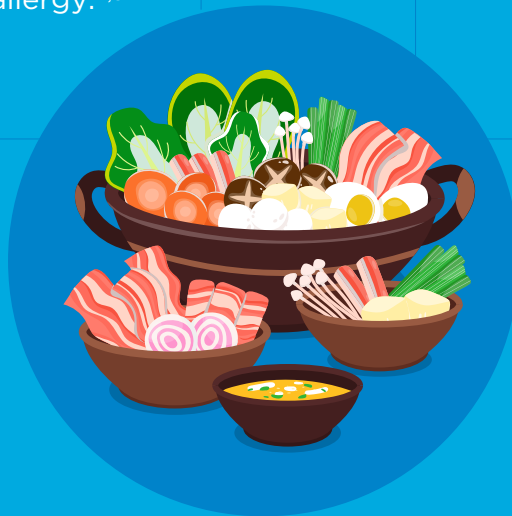
2

Carbohydrates are generally split into total carbohydrates (starches plus sugars) and sugars.¹

Nutritional information

3

The nutritional information on a food label gives typical values for energy, carbohydrates, and fats. Values are given per 100g and per portion.¹ Remember to look at the portion amount, as this will be closer to the amount you eat.



Fats

4

Food labels usually show the total amount of fat and its breakdown into saturates (unhealthy fats) and unsaturated (healthy fats).¹

Salt

This is how salt is calculated:
Salt (g) = sodium (g) x 2.5

Things to note: 1,2

- › Energy is measured in kilojoules (kJ) and kilocalories (kcal), referred to as calories.
- › Nutrition information is generally calculated per 100 grams (g) and includes fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, sugars, protein, and salt.
- › If the product contains significant quantities of certain ingredients, it is usually listed, as well as vitamins (e.g. A, B, D, and K) and minerals (e.g. selenium, molybdenum, chromium etc.)

Nutritional guidelines

The guidelines below give you an indication as to whether food is high in fat, saturated fat, salt, sugar or not:¹



Per 100g	A lot is...	A little is...
Total fat	17.5g	3g
Saturated fat	5g	1.5g
Sugar	22.5g	5g
Salt	1.5g	0.3g
Sodium	0.6g	0.1g
Fibre	3g	0.5g

Some food manufacturers use the traffic light labelling system on the nutritional information, which tells you at a glance if the food has high, medium, or low amounts of fat, saturated fat, salt, sugar, and energy:¹



Red = high

Amber = medium

Green = low

Most manufacturers include nutritional information on the front of food packaging, which is useful when comparing different food products at a glance.¹

What to look out for as a **daily average**

On average, a person who consumes 2,000 calories a day should:^{4,5}

1. Have no more than 70g of fat (including a maximum of 20g saturated fat).
2. Limit their sugar intake to 30g a day.
3. Aim to eat less than 6g of salt (or 2.4g of sodium).
4. Consume about 30g of fibre.



Tip: Try to eat as many foods that are labelled green or amber as possible.

Additional terms to **consider**:⁶

Use by	For food that goes off quickly, like fish, meat products, and fresh salads. Be sure to look out for additional instructions like: “refrigerate” or “eat within three days of opening”.
Best before	Appears on frozen, tinned, or dried foods. Once the date has passed, it does not necessarily mean that the food will be harmful, but rather that it may lose its flavour or texture.
Sell by	Some food packages contain a sell-by date. This date is generally directed at store employees for stock control purposes.

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This article was reviewed by Dr. Damiano Pizzol, Medical Advisor, TH&N – Integrated Health Team, Cigna.

Sources:

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