

Understanding food labels

Labels on packaged foods provide information that can help you make healthier food choices.

Understanding how to read food labels can help you choose foods with less saturated fat, salt (sodium) and kilojoules, and with more fibre. They can also provide information on the amount of carbohydrate in the food you eat, to help manage your blood glucose levels.

Information on food labels must meet Australian food labelling laws. Labels must:

- » be written in English
- » be clearly presented
- » show the 'use by' or 'best before' date
- » include an ingredients list
- » include a nutrition information panel
- » clearly identify food allergens and additives.



Nutrition information on food labels

When shopping for healthy foods, the two most useful tools are the nutrition information panel and the ingredients list.

Nutrition information panel

You will find a nutrition information panel on most packaged foods, as it is compulsory for manufacturers to include this. This panel provides useful information to help you compare similar products and choose the healthiest options for you.

Here is an example of a nutrition information panel.

Nutrition information			
Servings per package: 10			
Serving size: 35g (Approx 3 biscuits)			
		Quantity per serving	Quantity per 100g
Energy		522KJ	1490KJ
Protein		1.8g	5.1g
Fat	- Total	1.0g	2.9g
	- Saturated	0.2g	0.7g
Carbohydrate	- Total	26.5g	75.6g
	- Sugars	16.3g	46.5g
Sodium		53mg	150mg

When you read the nutrition information panel, check the serving size, the quantity per 100g column, the amount of energy (kilojoules), and the amount of fat, carbohydrate and sodium in the product. These components are explained below.



Serving size:

This is the average serving size of the product, according to the manufacturer, which can help you work out the nutrition information for the serve you eat. Check whether your serving size is the same as the recommended serving size. If your serve is smaller or larger, you will need to take this into account. A dietitian can help you with this.

Energy:

Energy is measured in kilojoules (kJ) or calories (cal). The amount of energy each of us needs depends on many factors and will vary from person to person. When comparing similar products, choosing those with fewer kilojoules can help with weight loss.

Fat:

'Total fat' includes all polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, saturated and trans fats in the food. It's important to consider both the amount and the type of fat.

Check the 'saturated fat' amount on similar products and choose the one with the least amount of saturated fat per 100g.

'Trans fats' are not required by law to be listed on the nutrition information panel but some manufacturers will list trans fats. Look for products with less than 1g of trans fats per 100 grams, particularly when buying margarines or baked goods.

Carbohydrate:

'Total carbohydrate' includes both the sugars and the starches in food. This figure is useful if you count carbohydrates to help manage your blood glucose levels. To work out the amount of carbohydrate in food use the per serve column. You may need to adjust this to suit your serving size.

The 'sugars' amount tells you how much of the total carbohydrate is made up of sugars, both added sugars and natural sugars such as lactose in milk and fructose in fruit.

Remember, it's the total carbohydrate that affects blood glucose levels, not just sugar.

A dietitian can help you work out how much carbohydrate you need each day.

Sodium:

This figure tells you how much salt (sodium) is in the food. Where possible, choose products with 'reduced' or 'no added' salt. A low-salt food has less than 120mg of sodium per 100g.

Percentage (%) daily intake

Some manufacturers may choose to include information about percentage (%) daily intake. This can be used to compare the nutrients in one serve of the food with what an 'average adult' needs. This is just a guide, as your daily intake may be higher or lower depending on your energy needs.



Tips on making healthy food choices

To decide whether a food is a healthy choice, compare products and ask yourself these questions:

Is the food an 'everyday' or a 'sometimes' food?

- » Fill your shopping trolley with a variety of 'everyday' healthy foods, such as fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, legumes, lean meats, fish, nuts, seeds and low-fat dairy. This leaves less room for 'sometimes' foods like chocolate, crisps, sweet biscuits and soft drinks.

Is the food lower in saturated fat?

- » Compare similar products and choose those with the least amount of saturated fat per 100g.

Is the food lower in sodium?

- » Healthier options have less than 120mg of sodium per 100g. Where possible, choose products that have 'reduced salt' or 'no added salt'.

Is the food high in fibre?

- » Not all labels show the fibre content, but higher fibre foods have more than 3g of dietary fibre per 100g. When comparing similar products, choose the one higher in fibre per 100g. This is particularly important for foods like breads and cereals. Adults should aim for at least 25-30g of fibre each day.

Ingredients list

All packaged foods must have an ingredients list on their labels. All ingredients are listed in descending order by weight (that is, the ingredient that weighs the most is listed first, and the ingredient that weighs the least is listed last).

You can use this information to help you decide whether the product is a healthy choice. For example, you can look at the ingredients list to find out whether the sugar in the product is from an added or a natural sugar.

Nutrition claims

Food manufacturers often use nutrition claims on their packaging to attract the shopper's attention. While the claim may be true, it may also be misleading – so it's useful to know the meaning of nutrition claims. Always check the nutrition information panel to see if the product is a healthy option.

Here are some common claims and what they mean.

High fibre

The food must contain at least 3g of fibre per average serving.

Reduced salt

This means the product contains at least 25% less salt than the regular product. However, the reduced salt version may still have a high salt content, so always check the nutrition information panel and compare similar products.

No added salt

Salt has not been added.

Low salt

A low-salt food has less than 120mg of sodium per 100g.

Low joule or diet

The product is usually artificially sweetened and/or low fat.

No added sugar

This means the product contains no added sugars (such as sucrose, honey or glucose). However, the product may still contain natural sugars, such as milk (lactose), fruit (fructose) or other carbohydrates, which can affect your blood glucose levels.

Low fat or 97% fat free

The food must contain no more than 3g of fat per 100g.

Reduced fat

This means the product contains at least 25% less fat than the regular product. However, this doesn't necessarily mean it's low in fat.

Lite or light

This may refer to a reduced fat content but it may also be used to describe taste, texture or colour. For example, light olive oil is lighter in colour and taste but not low in fat. Check for an explanation on the label and compare fat content per 100g with similar products.

Nutrition claims on food products

If a product includes a nutrition claim about a specific nutrient on the package, it must list the amount in the nutrition information panel. For example, if it makes a claim about dietary fibre, the amount of fibre must be listed in the panel.

Nutrition symbols

Food manufacturers can choose to display nutrition symbols such as the glycemic index (GI) symbol and the Health Star Rating system.

These symbols show that the product has been tested and meets specific criteria, but you should still check the nutrition information panel to make sure the product meets your needs.



More information

For more information about understanding food labels, visit: www.foodstandards.gov.au

The Healthy shopping guide – your essential supermarket companion can help you make healthy food choices. To purchase a copy, call **1300 136 588**.

The NDSS and you

The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Infoline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.

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