

Understanding food labels



What's in it?

The most important job for a food label is to tell you what the food actually is. It should also give a break down of the various nutritional elements of the food, and will include additives such as flavourings; colourings and preservatives along with any other chemicals or compounds, and all items must be listed in order of descending priority by weight.

What's in a name?

The law also states that the name of the product must not be misleading. Whenever the name of the food contains the word "flavour" the food does not have to contain any of those ingredients e.g. "smoky bacon flavour crisps". However, a food labelled "Cheese and onion pasty" must contain cheese and onion.

The European Directive on nutrition labelling recently introduced a standard format for nutrition labelling in the UK.

The information can be in one of two formats:

'Big 4' (information on: energy (kJ and kcals), protein, carbohydrate and fat) or:

'Big 4' plus the 'Little 4' (+ information on: saturates, sugars, fibre and sodium).

The amounts of each nutrient must be shown per 100g or per 100ml. Information can additionally be shown 'per serving' if the number of servings in the whole packet is given on the label.

Vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin C or calcium, can also be listed if the product contains at least 15% (i.e. a significant amount) of the **recommended daily amount (RDA)** for that nutrient.

Guide to food labelling

The chart below will help you recognise whether a food contains a high or low amount of a particular nutrient.

A lot (per 100g)	A little (per 100g)
10g of added sugars	2g of added sugars
20g of fat	3g of fat
5g of saturates	1g of saturates
3g of fibre	0.5g of fibre
1.25g of salt	0.25g of salt
0.5g of sodium	0.1g of sodium

Ingredients

Ingredients are listed in order by weight, according to the amounts that were used to make the food. The list starts with the greatest and ends with the least. Food additives and water must also be included in the list if they have been added.

INGREDIENTS

Wheatflour · Vegetable Oil and Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil · Dried Gouda Cheese (6%) · Flavouring (contains Colour: E150b · Yeast Extract · Chicken Extract) · Sugar · Dried Onion · Dried Edam Cheese (2%) · Raising Agent: E503, Sodium Bicarbonate · Dried Cheese · Salt · Poppy Seeds.

Additives

Additives must be listed, stating what their job is i.e. flavouring, colouring, stabiliser etc. Artificial flavourings will be listed by name, as they do not have E numbers.

Place of origin

The label must show clearly the place the food has come from if it would be misleading not to show it, for example, a tub of 'Greek Yoghurt', which was made in France.

Food claims. Where nutritional claims are made the food must comply with the following:

Low fat - No more than 5g per 100g (or 100ml) or those with less than 30% of calories coming from fat

Fat free- No more than 0.15g per 100g

Reduced Fat- 'Reduced' means the product contains 25% less fat than previously, which is not the same as being "low" fat.

Same food - different values

ASDA smartprice Bolognese Sauce £0.42 Cost per 100g = 9.5p		Lloyd Grossman Bolognese sauce £1.14 Cost per 100g = 32.5p	
440g Suitable for vegetarians		350g Suitable for vegetarians	
	Per 100g		Per 100g
Energy	39 Calories	Energy	88 Calories
Protein	0.9g	Protein	1.7g
Carbohydrate	7.0g	Carbohydrate	7.3g
Of which sugar	2.6g	Of which sugar	6.7g
Fat	0.8g	Fat	5.7g
Of which saturated	0.1g	Of which saturated	0.7g
Fibre	0.6g	Fibre	0.9g
Sodium	1.2g	Sodium	0.7g
Calories from fat	18%	Calories from fat	58%

From the above example, we can see that those two apparently similar foods "Bolognese sauce" have wildly differing nutritional properties. This is why it is important to start to read labels, and become aware of what to look out for, particularly if you eat packaged foods regularly.

Homework: examine one food label every day next week. Consider all of the ingredients, and note any examples of things that surprise you or that you did not previously know. Look out for:

- Foods that have lots of artificial ingredients such as artificial flavours, sweeteners, colours, stabilisers and preservatives.
- Foods that have a lot of sugar fat and salt
- Foods containing very few or little natural foods, or natural foods that have been altered: "Modified" "Hydrogenated" "Reconstituted", etc
- Watch out for ingredients that you do not recognise – if in doubt leave them on the shelf