

Food Labels Explained

Food labels carry useful information to help you make choices about food. The food label will tell you if the food contains an additive that you may want to avoid. The nutrition information panel helps you to compare the nutrient profile of similar products and choose the one that suits your needs.

Difference between 'use-by' and 'best before'

Foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have a 'best before' or 'use-by' date. These terms mean different things. The 'best before' date refers to the quality of the food – food stored in the recommended way will remain of good quality until that date. It may still be safe to eat certain foods after the 'best before' date, but they may have lost quality and some nutritional value. By contrast, foods that should not be consumed after a certain date for health and safety reasons must have a 'use-by' date and cannot be sold after that date. You will find 'use-by' dates on perishables such as meat, fish and dairy products.

Some foods carry the date they were manufactured or packed, rather than a 'use-by' date, so you can tell how fresh the food is. For example, bread and meat can be labelled with a 'baked on' or 'packed on' date. You should:

- Check the 'use-by' or 'best before' date when you buy food.
- Keep an eye on the 'use-by' or 'best before' dates on the food in your cupboards. Don't eat any food that is past its 'use-by' date, even if it looks and smells okay.

The food label list of ingredients

All ingredients must be listed in descending order by weight, including added water. So:

- The ingredient listed first is present in the largest amount.
- The ingredient listed last is present in the least amount.

If an ingredient makes up less than five per cent of the food, it does not have to be listed. Where there are very small amounts of multi-component ingredients (less than five per cent), it is permitted to list 'composite' ingredients only: for example, it may say 'chocolate' (rather than cocoa, cocoa butter and sugar) in a choc chip ice cream. This does not apply to any additive or allergen – these must be listed no matter how small the amount.

If it's called a meat pie, it must contain meat

The 'characterising ingredients' are usually mentioned in the name of the product or highlighted on the label. A characterising ingredient is the main ingredient you would expect to find in the food. For example, the characterising ingredient in a 'meat pie' is meat and the food label must state the percentage of meat in the pie.

Food additives

All food additives must have a specific use and they must be assessed and approved by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). They must be used in the lowest possible quantity that will achieve their purpose. Food additives are given in the ingredient list according to their class, which is followed by a chemical name or number. For example:

- Colour (tartrazine)
- Colour (102)
- Preservative (200)
- Emulsifier (lecithin).

The same food additive numbering system is used throughout the world. Vitamins and minerals are also listed under food additives.

The nutrition information panel

The nutrition information panel (NIP) tells you the quantity of various nutrients a food contains per serve, as well as per 100g or 100ml. It's best to use the 'per 100g or 100ml' to compare similar products, because the size of one 'serving' may differ between manufacturers.

Under labeling laws introduced in Australia in 2003, virtually all manufactured foods must carry an NIP. There are exceptions to the labeling requirements, such as:

- Very small packages and foods like herbs, spices, salt, tea and coffee
- Single ingredient foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables, water and vinegar
- Food sold at fundraising events
- Food sold unpackaged (if a nutrition claim is not made)
- Food made and packaged at the point of sale.

The nutrients listed in the NIP

The NIP provides information on seven nutrients: energy (kilojoules), protein, total fat, saturated fat, total carbohydrates, sugars and sodium. Cholesterol content does not have to be listed unless a claim is made.

Listing saturated fat on the NIP helps consumers decide whether a food product may affect their blood cholesterol levels. Saturated fat has a more significant effect on blood cholesterol levels than mono- or polyunsaturated fats. It is generally present in higher amounts in animal-based products, but can also be found in non-animal-based foods, such as commercial biscuits and cakes (which contain hydrogenated vegetable oil – often listed as vegetable fat or shortening).

Listing nutrients

Other nutrients such as fibre, potassium, calcium and iron may be listed if a claim is made on the label. The nutrients are displayed in a standard format, providing amount per serve and per 100g (or 100ml if liquid).

The following are large amounts per 100g:

- 30g of sugars
- 20g of fat
- 3g of fibre
- 600mg of sodium.

The following are small amounts per 100g:

- 2g of sugars
- 3g of fat
- 0.5g of fibre
- 20mg sodium.

Nutrition claims on labels

Don't be misled by labeling tricks and traps. The terms used are often misleading. For example:

- The term 'light' or 'lite' doesn't necessarily mean that the product is low in fat or energy. The term 'light' may refer to the texture, colour or taste of the product. The characteristic that makes the food 'light' must be stated on the label.
- The claims 'no cholesterol', 'low cholesterol' or 'cholesterol free' on foods derived from plants, like margarine and oil, are meaningless because all plant foods contain virtually no cholesterol. However, some can be high in fat and can contribute to weight gain if used too generously.
- If an item claims to be 93 per cent fat free, it actually contains 7 per cent fat, but it looks so much better the other way.
- 'Baked not fried' sounds healthier, but it may still have just as much fat – check the nutrition information panel to be sure.
- 'Fresh as' actually means the product hasn't been preserved by freezing, canning, high-temperature or chemical treatment. However, it may have been refrigerated and spent time in processing and transport.

Nutrition claims must meet the guidelines

For a manufacturer to make various claims, their products must meet the following guidelines:

- No added sugar – products must not contain added sugar, but may contain natural sugars.
- Reduced fat or salt – should be at least a 25 per cent reduction from the original product.
- Low fat – must contain less than 3 per cent fat for solid foods (1.5 per cent for liquid foods).
- Fat free – must be less than 0.15 per cent fat.
- Percentage of fat – remember 80 per cent fat free is the same as 20 per cent fat, which is a large amount.

Avoiding fats, sugars or salt requires careful checking

The ingredient list will specify the contents of a product. However, if you are trying to avoid fat, sugar or salt, they may be added in many forms and scattered all over the ingredients list. For example, ingredients that contain fat include:

- Beef fat
- Butter
- Shortening
- Coconut
- Coconut oil or palm oil
- Copha
- Cream
- Dripping
- Oven fried and baked or toasted implies the inclusion of fat.
- Lard
- Mayonnaise
- Sour cream
- Vegetable oils and fats
- Hydrogenated oils
- Full-cream milk powder
- Egg (cholesterol)
- Mono-, di- or triglycerides.

Ingredients that contain sugar include:

- Brown sugar
- Corn syrup
- Dextrose
- Disaccharides
- Fructose
- Glucose
- Golden syrup
- Honey
- Lactose
- Malt
- Maltose
- Mannitol
- Maple syrup
- Molasses
- Monosaccharides
- Raw sugar
- Sorbitol
- Sucrose
- Xylitol.

Ingredients that contain salt (sodium) include:

- Baking powder
- Booster
- Celery salt
- Garlic salt
- Sodium
- Meat or yeast extract
- Onion salt
- Monosodium glutamate (msg)
- Rock salt
- Sea salt
- Sodium bicarbonate
- Sodium metabisulphate
- Sodium nitrate/nitrite and stock cubes.

Allergy sufferers

Food labels can help people with allergies or intolerances to foods. Common foods that may cause allergies include – peanuts, other nuts, seafood, fish, milk, gluten, eggs, soybeans. The main foods or ingredients that may cause severe adverse reactions must be declared on the label no matter how small the amount.

There must also be information to alert people who may be unaware of a possible health risk from some ingredients: for example aspartame, quinine, caffeine, guarana, royal jelly, unpasteurised milk or egg.

Country of origin

‘Product of Australia’ means that significant ingredients must come from Australia and most of the processing should happen here too. A ‘Made in Australia’ statement may only mean that the food was ‘substantially transformed’ here and that a certain proportion of the production costs were incurred here. These definitions are currently under review.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- A registered nutritionist or registered public health nutritionist
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) Tel. (02) 6271 2222

Things to remember

- ‘Best before’ dates indicate how long food will remain of good quality – food is still safe to eat after this date.
- Do not eat food after the ‘use-by’ date, because it may be unsafe to eat.
- You can use the nutrition information panel to compare similar products.