



Information Sheet 7a – Food Labels - Nutrition

What specific nutritional information appears on labels?

Energy

This is the amount of energy - calories - that the food will give you when you eat it. It is measured either in calories (kcal) or joules (kJ).

Protein

Protein is important for body growth and repair. Most adults get more than enough protein for their needs.

Carbohydrate

Mainly sugars and starch. Most labels tell you how much of the total carbohydrate is sugars (the remainder is mostly starch).

Starch

We should get most of our energy from starch, rather than from fats and sugars. (Foods with plenty of starch include bread, breakfast cereals, rice, pasta and potatoes.)

Sugars

This covers both sugars which occur naturally in fruit and milk, and added sugar. Added sugars can cause tooth decay when eaten frequently.

Saturated fat

This type of fat may raise blood cholesterol levels, which can cause heart disease. (For a healthy heart, cut back on saturates, for example, pies, sausages, butter, cheese, cakes and biscuits.)

Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat

Monounsaturates are neutral for heart disease, and polyunsaturates lower blood cholesterol levels. It is better to eat foods rich in monounsaturates (olive oil and rapeseed oil) and polyunsaturates (sunflower oil and soya oil), than foods rich in saturates. But remember, they are still fats.

Dietary fibre

Fibre helps prevent constipation, piles and bowel problems. (Good sources of fibre are baked beans, kidney beans, high-fibre breakfast cereals, wholemeal bread, fruit and vegetables.)

Sodium

Most sodium in food is from salt. Sodium can help to cause high blood pressure. More than two-thirds of the sodium we eat comes from processed foods, so check the nutrition label to cut back on it.



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Labels on Food

Few of us have time to scrutinise every food label when we do our weekly shop at the supermarket. But with just a quick check, we can learn more about the food we are buying, and make healthier choices.

The label must display all the ingredients in order of weight.

The list allows you to screen for ingredients that you want to avoid, and it also allows you to understand the proportion of ingredients in the product.

So if fat or sugar is at the top of the list, the product contains a high fat or sugar content.

The product is only obliged to carry nutrition information if it makes a claim, such as "low fat". This nutrition information includes:

Energy: the amount of energy in (calories or kcals) that a food provides.

Fat: the total amount of fat that the product contains. Different types of fat are listed: polyunsaturated, monounsaturated and saturated.

For more on fats, see our article on fats.

Carbohydrate: the total carbohydrate in food, which includes sugars and starches. For more on carbohydrates, please see our article on carbohydrates.

Sodium: this tells you how much salt the food contains. Salt is made up of two components: sodium and chloride. Every gram of salt contains roughly 0.42 grams of sodium. So, to get a good estimate of the amount of salt in the product, we need to double the listed sodium content. The recommended daily limit of salt is 6g, which means that we should only be eating 2.5g or less of sodium a day.

For more on salt, please see our article Shake the salt habit.

Nutritional Information

Nutritional information on the label is given "per 100g" or "per 100ml". This is so that you can compare the product with other products easily. It also helps you to understand the amount of each ingredient as a percentage.

So if there are 20g fat in 100g of lasagne, the product is 20% fat.

The majority of foods must carry instructions on storage.

Perishable foods also display a "use-by" date, while canned and dried foods will usually have a "best before" date.



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The "use by" date means that the food should not be used after this date because it could pose a health hazard.

The "best before" date means that the food can be eaten after this date, but it will not be in its best state: its texture may have deteriorated or its flavour may be less.

The label may also contain other advice about storage or how long it can be eaten after the package has been opened.

The volume or weight of the product must be listed. An "e" besides the weight indicates that this is an average weight for the product.

The claim "reduced fat" next to a product can only be used if the food contains at least 25% less than its counterpart. The claim "reduced calorie" means that the food is lower in calories than the standard version. However, remember that these are relative terms - "reduced fat" chocolate cake isn't the same as "low fat" - it could still contain a considerable amount of fat.

When the term "light" is used on the label, it is usually because it is a lower fat/calorie version of another product. However, it may still be high in calories or fat.

For the term "low fat" to be used on a product, the Government says that the product must contain less than 3g fat per 100g. However, this is only a recommendation so you should still check the nutrition information.

GM soya and maize must legally be identified.

Additives must be listed by their name or E number.

Flavourings must also be listed, but not necessarily by their name.

Recommended daily amount (RDA) is the minimum amount of a particular vitamin or mineral that we need to eat each day to stay healthy. The RDAs used on food labels are set by the European Directive on labeling. They differ slightly to the RDAs set by the UK Department of Health, (which were replaced in 1991 with dietary reference values (DRVs)).