

How to read food labels

The following information will help you work out what all the fine print on the back of labels means and how you can use it to choose healthy food items.

While ideally our diets should be based around fresh whole foods, there are times when reaching for packaged foods is quicker or easier. Food labels provide us with a wealth of information to help us decide if a food or drink is suitable to consume or not. But it does mean spending longer in the supermarket initially to work through it all.

To save time check the labels of food you already have in the cupboard before visiting the supermarket.

Alternatively, choose one or two types of food to investigate at a time. Information on labels can be small and difficult to read. Taking reading glasses or a magnifying glass may help.

All food packages are legally required to have a nutrition information panel (NIP) and a list of ingredients. These are not always on the same section of the label. Labels may also include nutritional claims.

Knowing what's the right choice isn't always easy!

Nutrition Information Panel

A NIP is required to provide nutrient content per serve and per 100g.

Specific nutrient information provided includes:

- > **Energy content**
(in kilojoules and sometimes calories)
- > **Protein content**
- > **Fat and saturated fat content**
- > **Total carbohydrate**
- > **Sugar content**
- > **Sodium (salt) content**
- > **Any nutrient about which a claim has been made**
e.g. "good source of calcium" requires calcium included in the NIP

Some products also provide information on the fibre content but are not legally required to do this.

Some foods provide nutrient information on different serving presentations such as breakfast cereals served with milk.



ENERGY

Energy is another word for calories (kcal) or kilojoules (kJ). Calories or kilojoules come from fats, carbohydrates and protein. Energy you eat is stored as fat if it is not used by the body. A food can be low in fat or sugar and still be high in calories/kilojoules.

FAT & SATURATED FAT

Fat is high in calories/kilojoules. Eating a lot of fat can increase calories/kilojoules intake and lead to weight gain. Saturated fat can increase unhealthy cholesterol levels and risk of heart disease.

CARBOHYDRATE and SUGARS

Carbohydrate provides calories/kilojoules and will increase blood glucose levels. It is important to eat some carbohydrate but not too much. Sugar is part of the the total carbohydrate in food. A small amount of sugar in food is acceptable.

FIBRE

Fibre is not always shown on a food label. It is found in fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grain breads and cereals.

SODIUM (SALT)

Choose foods with lower sodium content especially if you have high blood pressure.

Golden Munchies <i>Your favourite breakfast cereal</i>		
NUTRITION INFORMATION		
Servings per package: 15 Serving size: 30g		
	Per serve	Per 100g
Energy	500kj 119kcal	1670kj 379kcal
Protein	2.2g	7.4g
Fat	0.6g	1.8g
- saturated	0.3g	0.9g
Carbohydrate	26g	87g
- sugars	4.2g	14g
Dietary Fibre	2.1g	7g
Sodium	117mg	390mg
Iron	3mg	10mg
Folate	50g	167g
Ingredients	Wheatmeal, Rice Flour, Maize Flour, Sugar, Sultanas, Skim Milk Powder, Salt, Sodium Bicarbonate, Iron, Folate, Turmeric	

Per 100g column

The 100g column is the most frequently used information. Use the 100g column to compare similar products or to select foods based on specific guidelines. For example to find a breakfast cereal with the highest fibre content, compare the fibre per 100g of different cereals.

The following guidelines will help identify healthier food items based on their nutrient content:

FAT

- > Choose foods with less than 2g saturated fat per 100g
- > Low fat yoghurt has less than 2g total fat per 100g
- > Low fat milk has less than 1g total fat per 100g
- > As a general guide, choose other foods with less than 10g total fat per 100g

SUGAR

- > Low sugar breakfast cereal and yoghurt have less than 15g sugar per 100g
- > Avoid drinks with more than 2.5g carbohydrate per 100g
- > Choose other foods with less than 10g sugar per 100g

FIBRE

- > Choose foods with more than 6g fibre per 100g

SALT/SODIUM

- > Food with low sodium content has less than 120mg per 100g
- > Food with high sodium content has more than 600mg per 100g

Per serve column

Use the per serve column to find out the amount of carbohydrate in a serving. For example: "One serve of this breakfast cereal is 30g and contains 26g of carbohydrate".

Check the serving size and servings per pack first. A 600ml drink bottle may contain three serves but if you are thirsty you may drink the whole bottle.

List of ingredients

All food packages include a list of ingredients but they are not always found as part of the nutrition information panel. Ingredients are listed in order of quantity from largest to smallest. Sugar, fat and salt are often listed in the ingredient list under different names.

Compare these products yourself:

- > How many servings in the package of fruit juice?
- > How many servings in the package of fizzy drink?
- > In 100mls, how much sugar is in the:
 - Pure Orange Juice?
 - Fizzy Drink?
 - Diet fizzy drink?
- > Does 'no added sugar' mean that there will be no sugar in the product?

Pure Orange Juice <i>No added sugar</i>		
NUTRITION INFORMATION		
Servings per package: 4 Serving size: 250ml		
	Per serve	Per 100g
Energy	455kj 82kcal	182kj 43kcal
Fat	<1g	<1g
- saturated	0g	0g
Carbohydrate	26.8g	10.7g
- sugars	26.8g	10.7g
Protein	<1g	<1g
Dietary Fibre	<1g	<1g
Sodium	8mg	3.2mg
Vitamin C	87mg	35mg
Ingredients	Reconstituted orange juice, flavour, vitamin C	

Fizzy Drink		
NUTRITION INFORMATION		
Servings per package: 2 Serving size: 250ml		
	Per serve	Per 100ml
Energy	450kj 107kcal	180kj 43kcal
Fat	0g	0g
- saturated	0g	0g
Carbohydrate	26.5g	10.6g
- sugars	26.5g	10.6g
Protein	0g	0g
Dietary Fibre	0g	0g
Sodium	25mg	10mg
Ingredients	Carbonated water, sugar, flavour, colour (150a)	

Diet Fizzy Drink		
NUTRITION INFORMATION		
Servings per package: 2 Serving size: 250ml		
	Per serve	Per 100ml
Energy	4kj 1.0kcal	1.5kj 0.4kcal
Fat	0g	0g
- saturated	0g	0g
Carbohydrate	0.25g	0.1g
- sugars	0g	0g
Protein	0g	0g
Dietary Fibre	0g	0g
Sodium	42mg	15mg
Ingredients	Carbonated water, flavour, colour (150a), sweetener, preservative	

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