



### Food labels – what do they mean?

When it comes to clothes, labels are everything! When it comes to food, the story is quite similar. Consumer interest in food labeling is growing. Unfortunately a big barrier to reading food labels is that they are difficult to understand. Shoppers need to have the skills to decode the complicated jargon.

Did you know?

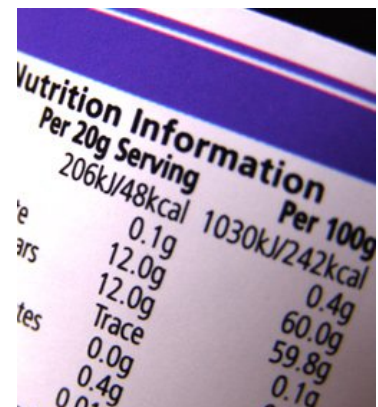
- It is illegal to make false or misleading claims on food labels
- Food companies do not have to provide nutritional information unless a health claim, such as 'low in fat', is made.
- Ingredients are listed in descending order i.e. largest ingredient first
- All nutritional information must be given per 100g or per 100ml
- The terms 'light' and 'lite' don't mean anything in relation to food and can be used by anyone on any product.
- Sodium is not the same as salt. Salt is sodium chloride so sodium is just one part of a molecule of salt. Here's how you figure out salt from sodium:

$$\text{Sodium} \times 2.5 = \text{Salt content}$$

$$\text{Salt} / 2.5 = \text{Sodium content}$$

#### The Nutrition Panel

This is where you will find the information on the nutrient breakdown of a product. It is not obligatory unless a company makes a health claim. Energy is measured in kilocalories (kcal) and kilojoules (kJ). Other nutrients are shown in grams (g). Be wary of sodium. Fats may be broken down into saturated and unsaturated – choose products with a majority of unsaturated rather than saturated fat. 'Of which sugars' indicates the amount of refined carbohydrate compared to complex carbohydrate – this should be less than 10g.



#### Portion size

Do you calculate the correct calorie intake for the portion size you eat? Examine this nutrition panel. If you eat 200g, you take in 4 servings and 4 times the calories and other nutrients i.e. 16.2 g fat and 716 calories compared with 4.1g fat and 179 kcals. This can easily happen with snack food like crisps or nuts.

'90 % fat free'

Do you recognize this common marketing slogan? It means that 10% of the product must be fat. For a product to be labeled low-fat it must be less than 3% fat. So this product is, in fact, high fat. This is not a false claim, but it can lead to impulse buying if you don't calculate your percentages first.

#### Endorsed Health Claims

Sometimes manufacturers provide more information on their labels than others. Where a nutrient is particularly abundant in a food, like vitamin C in orange juice, the manufacturer may want to draw attention to the product. To



use a caption like 'High in Vitamin C', the quantity of vitamin C must be detailed on the nutrition panel as proof. Health authorities have approved the following health claims. To use one of these claims, manufacturing companies must comply with set criteria.

- Low Fat / 97 % Fat Free = Less than 3g fat in 100g
- Low in Saturates = Less than 3g saturated fat in 100g
- Virtually Fat Free = Less than 0.3g fat in 100g
- Reduced Fat = At least 25% less fat than standard product
- Low Sugar = Less than 5g sugar in 100g
- Sugar Free = No added or naturally occurring sugar
- No Added Sugar = No extra sugar added
- Reduced Sugar = At least 25% less sugar than standard product
- High Fibre = At least 6g fibre in 100g
- Reduced Sodium (salt) = At least 25% less sodium (salt) than standard product
- Low Calorie / Diet = Less than 40 calories in 100g or 100ml

### What about 'Use By' dates?

You should not eat foods after their 'Use By' date as they might not be safe to eat. Microbial changes take place in the food after this time that can put your life at risk. 'Best Before' dates are slightly different. This is more to do with quality than safety. It means that the product is best eaten before this date. The flavour or texture may deteriorate after this date but it is not unsafe, with the exception of eggs. 'Sell By' or 'Display until' dates are used to help staff keep control of stock – this is done by choice and is always in addition to 'Use By' or 'Best Before' dates.

### Special dietary needs

Warnings on packaging help those with allergies or intolerances to avoid certain ingredients. The phrase 'May contain' limits food choice even further, because many allergy sufferers are not willing to put themselves at risk. As it is difficult for manufacturers to guarantee a completely gluten-free product, the gluten free symbol is not often volunteered. The Vegetarian Society permits products that comply with their regulations to use their logo. 'Suitable for Vegetarians' is voluntary but must be used honestly.

### E- numbers

Contrary to popular belief, E numbers are additives that have passed EU safety tests. You should be more concerned if you see numbers without an E before them. The function of E numbers is detailed in the ingredient list e.g. E220 or Sulphur Dioxide is a preservative that prevents mould from growing on dried fruit; E410 or Locust Bean Gum is a stabilizer that prevents ingredients separating out in a product. Ongoing safety tests ensure these additives are not harmful to consume.



# Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute Fact Sheet

## Pictures on food packaging

The pictures on packets and labels must not be misleading. A strawberry yoghurt that gets its flavour from artificial flavouring, and not from fruit, is not allowed to have a picture of strawberries on the pot.

## What is your food saying to you ?

Foods can tell you a lot about themselves. So don't just grab the first product you see, read the label and find out more about the foods you are eating. You might be surprised.