



Understanding food labels



Health



Wellness



Nutrition



Support

Introduction

In the UK, all food and drink packaging must have a label with nutritional information to help us make informed decisions. These food labels can help you choose between products and keep a check on how much fat, salt and added sugars you are eating.

This booklet is our guide to what to look out for, and what it means for your health.

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What to look for on the front of packaging

Traffic light labels

Experts designed the traffic light system to help you make a quick, informed decision when choosing foods. These labels show the nutrients that impact our health the most, making them the most important things to consider when it comes to making healthier choices. There are benefits to this system, but also some key things to look out for.

A traffic light label will show you how much of the following is in one portion of the food or drink:

- Calories (kcal)
- Total fat
- Saturated fat
- Sugars
- Salt

The government recommend the labels are colour-coded and include what percentage of your daily recommended allowance the item would represent.

Green = Lower in nutrient content and a healthier choice

Amber = Not a bad choice, but be aware this is higher than you may want

Red = Contains a high volume of that nutrient

While this is now general practice among food manufacturers, it's important to note that they **do not** have to include traffic light labels, or make them colourful. In these situations, you need to pay attention to the numbers more or take a good look at the Information on the back of the package.

The best way to use traffic light labels is to compare two similar products, for example two different yoghurts, cereals or pre-made sandwiches. For a healthier choice, choose products with more greens and fewer reds - and, if a food contains a red label, try to limit the number of times you eat this food.

Portion size

Pay attention to the portion size as this is not always the full packet or bottle. For example, a ready meal could show a traffic light label with one portion as half of the pack. If you are planning to eat the full pack, you will need to account for double what the label shows.

Does red or amber always mean something is less healthy?

Traffic light labels are just one way of spotting a healthier product. However, a food with red or amber isn't always unhealthy. Some natural foods (e.g. unsalted foods and natural yoghurt) can be naturally higher in fat, while tinned fruits can be naturally high in sugars. It's important, therefore, to consider the type for food you are buying when comparing food labels.

Food marketing

On the front and, sometimes, the back of food packaging there will be different images, colours, slogans and health claims used. While the label cannot lie to you, this is entirely the choice of the food manufacturer.

Billions of pounds go into research and food marketing to make products as appealing as possible to us. It's important to be aware of this so we don't fall into a trap of something that looks good, but may be less healthy.

Clever colours and images

Did you know different colours and shapes appeal to different emotions? We learn to recognise these and associate them with our lives. Think about the examples below (you can probably guess most of the brands)...

- the vivid red of a well-known cola brand
- the golden arches of a restaurant chain
- the deep velvety purple of a chocolate brand
- characters on cereal boxes are *greeeeat...* for marketing

Health claims

Colours and images are not well controlled, but health claims printed on food packaging **must be true** by law. Nutritional claims relate to what a product does or does not contain, or what a food contains in a higher or lower amount. For example:

- 'High in fibre' must contain at least 6g fibre per 100g
- 'Source of Vitamin D' must contain at least 15 per cent of the recommended intake for Vitamin D per 100g
- 'Low fat' must contain less than 3g fat per 100g
- 'Sugar free' must contain less than 0.5g sugars per 100g

Manufacturers are not allowed to claim that a food can prevent, treat or cure any disease or medical condition, and neither are they allowed to refer to an amount of weight loss you can expect by using the product.

But even with these claims, *always check the label*. Calories, fats and sugars can sometimes be replaced with processed ingredients which do not always make the product healthier.

If a natural ingredient is being replaced with a processed one, consider if the food or drink swap is better for you or just a case of replacing ingredients in order to sound healthier.

Since the marketing of foods is not well regulated, we need to be more aware of the labels and the swaps that food manufacturers make to their foods in order to appear to be healthy choices.

What to look for on the back of packaging

Ingredients lists

All food packaging must have an ingredients list. Sometimes this is clear on the back of packaging, or sometimes it's on the side or tucked under the label. Ingredients lists tell you exactly what products are included in the food you are buying. The order that they are listed is by volume, so there is more of whatever is listed first than any of the ingredients that follow. Allergens, meanwhile, are listed in **bold**.

See the below example from a supermarket cottage pie (450g)...

Ingredients: Mashed Potato [Potato, Skimmed **Milk**, Butter (**Milk**), Salt, White Pepper], Beef (28 per cent), Onion, Water, Corn flour, Wheat Flour [**Wheat** Flour, Calcium Carbonate, Iron, Niacin, Thiamin], Tomato Purée, Beef Extract, Rapeseed Oil, Garlic Purée, Caramelized Sugar, Salt, Sugar, Tomato Paste, Onion Concentrate, Thyme, White Pepper, Bay Leaf.

Lookout for added salt and sugar which can be listed in various forms such as glucose, sucrose, maltodextrin, syrup and sugar syrups. If you see a word you do not recognize or cannot even say, then it's likely something you wouldn't want as part of your diet.

Nutrition information

As with the ingredients list, nutrition information **must** be shown on packaging. This can often be in a table format, but also just a written list if the product packaging is smaller.

A nutrition information labels must include:

- Energy - in calories (kcal) and kilojoules (kj)
- Fat content - in grams (g)
- Saturated fat content - in grams (g)
- Carbohydrate content - in grams (g)
- Sugar content - in grams (g)
- Protein content - in grams (g)
- Salt content - in grams (g)

On most packaging you will see this listed per 100g of the food. This means if you ate or drank 100g of that product, you would eat the specified amount of each nutrient. This can be really useful when comparing products side-by-side.

A larger package might also have the information listed per portion or per pack, depending on how much of the product you are likely to eat in one go. For example, most cereals will give a portion comparison but a ready meal will give per pack information. Even without the portion size, you can look at the label to see if you can make a healthier swap based on the per 100g label.

Additionally, make sure you consider the total package size of the food. While comparing the per 100g labels is great, if you eat twice the amount then you reduce the benefits of swapping.

Spotting an ultra-processed food

Ultra-processed foods (or UPFs) have got a lot of media attention recently. There's still some debate on the best way to define a UPF, but there are some simple things to look for.

If any or all of these apply to the food you are purchasing, it's worth thinking about a smarter swap, or ensuring the product is only enjoyed as an occasional treat:

- the ingredients list is longer than five ingredients
- it has a lot of added salt, sugar and/or fats
- there are ingredients that are difficult to spell or say

Your turn

Grab some packaged products from your cupboards. These could be breakfast cereals, tinned foods, bread or pre-packaged meals. Have a look at the labels and make a note of anything you spot.

Never assume the most expensive product is the best for your health and try the Martin Lewis Downshift Challenge. While the focus is on cost saving, some cheaper products have less processing and are better for your health. More information is available on the official Money Saving Expert website: www.moneysavingexpert.com/shopping/downshift-challenge.

Final thought

Remember that food packaging is designed to sell a product to you, and marketing is all about drawing our attention. Marketers know that we want to make healthy choices and will attempt to present their product as a healthy choice, even when it is not.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch.

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