
Food labels

Summary

- 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 on food packages to compare similar products.
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Food labels carry useful information to help you make good 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.

'Use-by' and 'best before' on food labels

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.

To be sure that food is okay to eat:

- 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.

Lists of ingredients on food labels

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

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

If an ingredient (other than an allergen or additive) 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.

Food additives on food labels

All food additives must have a specific use and they must be assessed and approved by **Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)**. Food additives can be used to improve quality of a food or improve the flavour or appearance of a food. 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)
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- 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 on food labels

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

Under labelling laws introduced in Australia in 2003, virtually all manufactured foods must carry an NIP. There are exceptions to the labelling 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.

Nutrients listed in the NIP

The NIP provides information on seven nutrients, being energy (in 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 nutrients on food labels

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 100 g (or 100 ml if liquid).

The following are large amounts per 100 g:

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

The following are small amounts per 100 g:

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

Nutrition claims on food labels

Don't be misled by labelling 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' 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 and health claims on food labels must meet the guidelines

Manufacturers can make various claims regarding the content of their product. **Standard 1.2.7 Nutrition, health and related claims** controls the use of content claims on food labels.

Nutrition content claims make statements about certain nutrients or substances in a food, for example 'high in calcium.'

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

- **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
- **good source of** – must contain no less than 25 per cent of the RDI for that vitamin or mineral.

Health claims can also be made about a food product and relate to a nutrient or substance in a food, and its effect on health. There are two types of health claims:

- **general level health claims** demonstrate the effect on a health function due to a nutrient or substance that is present in a food. 'Calcium is good for bones' is an example
- **high level health claims** refer to a serious disease or biomarker and its relationship to a nutrient or substance according to scientific research. For example, diets high in calcium can reduce the risk of osteoporosis. There are only 13 pre-approved high level health claims that can be made in Australia.

Fats, sugars and salt on food labels

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
- lard
- mayonnaise
- sour cream
- vegetable oils and fats
- hydrogenated oils
- full-cream milk powder
- egg (cholesterol)
- mono-, di- or triglycerides.

Oven fried and baked or toasted implies the inclusion of fat.

Ingredients that contain sugar include:

- brown sugar
- corn syrup

- de-ionised fruit juice
- dextrose
- disaccharides
- fructose
- fruit juice concentrate/fruit paste
- 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
- seasoning
- sodium bicarbonate
- sodium metabisulphate
- sodium nitrate/nitrite and stock cubes.

Allergens on food labels

Food labels can help people with allergies or intolerances to foods. The main foods or ingredients that may cause severe adverse reactions must be declared on the label no matter how small the amount.

Common foods that may cause allergies include peanuts, other nuts, seafood, fish, milk, gluten, eggs, soybeans.

Some labels may also state 'may contain' because there is a possibility that traces of an allergen may be present in a food unintentionally, such as food processed on the same equipment as products that contain nuts.

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

Country of origin on food labels

All packaged food and some unpackaged food must state where the food comes from. 'Product of Australia'

means that most ingredients must come from Australia and the majority 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.

Kilojoule (energy) labelling on unpackaged, ready-to-eat foods

From 1 May 2018, you will see kilojoules (energy content) on the labels or price tags of unpackaged ready-to-eat food items at large chain supermarkets. This includes food such as bakery items like scrolls, pizzas and finger buns. Find out more about [kilojoule labelling in Victoria](#).

Where to get help

- **[Food Standards Australia New Zealand](#)** (FSANZ) Tel. (02) 6271 2222
- **[Dietitians Association of Australia](#)**
- **[Nutrition Australia](#)**
- **[Heart Foundation – Healthy eating](#)**
- **[Unpack the salt](#)**
- **[Australian Competition and Consumer Commission \(Country of Origin Labelling\)](#)**

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