

# FOOD LABELS MADE EASY

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# Food Labels Made Easy

Have you ever been confused by food labelling? Or maybe you haven't really paid that much attention. Here's a quick guide to help you to make informed decisions about the food you buy, without having to spend time deliberating in the food aisle.



Firstly – what are we looking for?

Ideally, we should all keep within our daily allowance, especially saturated fat, sugar and salt. The UK government (on the NHS Live Well site) recommends an intake of no more than 30g sugar per day and no more than 30g saturated fat (men) and 20g saturated fat (women).

Our daily salt intake should be down at around 6g per day (2.4 g sodium) – that's around a teaspoonful.

So, what does this mean when we look at labels?

We need to **keep our daily intake of saturated fat down to 3g or less per 100g** of product, **sugars down to 5g or less per 100g** and **salt at below 0.3g per 100g**. If the figures shown on a food label are higher than this, then they are not worthy of a 'low fat', 'low sugar', or 'low salt' label

Most of us don't keep a tally, but the general idea is to keep your sugar, saturated fat and salt intake consumption down on a daily basis.

	LOW	HIGH
Fat	3g of fat or less per 100g	More than 17.5g of fat per 100g
Sugars	5g or less per 100g	More than 22.5g per 100g
Salt	0.3g of salt or less per 100g	More than 1.5g of salt per 100g

From NHS Live Well site

With this in mind, let's go back to those labels.

You pick up a product on the shelf. It looks pretty healthy. It's been advertised on TV as 'healthy' after all and it says on the front of the packet that it's good for your heart. But before you put it in the trolley, you decide to check the ingredients, just in case. You realise at this point that those pesky numbers are really useful.



Let's look at those lists from the perspective of the everyday shopper. If you have special dietary needs then the best place to get advice is from a dietician or a nutritionist.

What we should all be aiming for is a healthy, balanced diet that meets our needs in terms of activity levels and goals. Food labels can help us make informed choices. We should aim, wherever possible, to choose and eat foods that have been minimally processed.

Looking at the label, you will see that the ingredients are listed and they are shown in weight order, with the main ingredient listed first. So a quick glance at the first few ingredients on the list can reveal a lot about the product. For example, if any of the first few ingredients listed is sugar, you may want to put the item back on the shelf. Another thing to be aware of, is that the more ingredients contained in the food item (i.e. the longer the ingredients list), the more processed the food is.

Many food labels also show the contents listed as % of content or per 100g / 100ml. So on first glance, the sugar content may look okay, but when you realise that the drink in your hand is 250ml total, then actually the total sugar content of that drink might be far from healthy.

For example, let's say you see a drink which says '*only 90 calories*' on the label. On first glance, that might sound fine. But before you buy it, check out the small print on the label. You may find that the 90 calories is per 100ml and that the bottle contains a total of 500ml of liquid. So there's actually 450 calories in the whole drink. That's a big difference!



Sugars are often disguised in many ways. Here are some common examples:

- Honey
- Syrup
- Nectar
- Juice concentrate
- Anything ending in 'ose' (fructose, glucose, dextrose, maltose)

There is a lot of debate over natural sugars (found in fruit) and added sugar. Common sense will tell you that an apple is a much healthier snack than a couple of biscuits, even if both contain the same amount of sugar. Fruit also contains fibre which helps, amongst other things, to make you feel full, whereas biscuits cause a sugar high and a subsequent insulin dump.

**Remember, as a rule of thumb, the sugar content should ideally be below 5g per 100g.**

Be wary of items which claim to be '*reduced fat*'. It's difficult to know what it has been reduced from and by how much. Reducing the fat content by 1% is hardly the same as halving it! And even halved it might still be over the ideal amount of 1.5g of saturated fat per 100g of product. Also, it's worth considering what has been added to replace the fat – it's often sugar.

'*Reduced*', '*improved*', and '*vitamin-packed*' are just some of the definitions that need careful scrutiny. Remember, these terms are often used as marketing tools to persuade us to buy products. '*No added sugar*', may well mean that extra sugar hasn't been added during manufacture, but it might still contain more than a healthy amount of sugar, so it always pays to double check the label.

And let's take a look at the term '*organic*'. In the UK we are currently controlled by EU standards for organic farming. Nothing should be labelled as organic unless it meets the criteria but being organic doesn't necessarily mean ultra-healthy. The meat in your pie might be organic but the pastry is still high fat and full of simple carbs. Your fruit might be organically grown but once stewed with plenty of sugar it isn't the healthiest choice you can make!

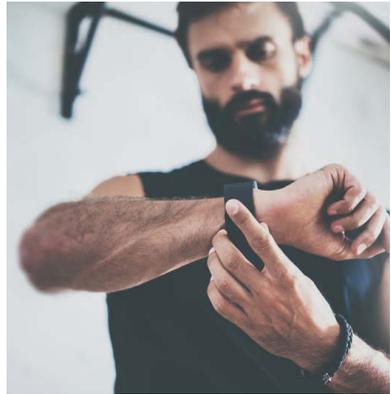
The Soil Association certifies over 80% of organic product in the UK so look for the symbol when buying organic.

The same principles apply to terms such as '*Whole Grain*' or '*Multi Grain*'. If you see these types of labels on packaging, don't forget to look at the sugar, fat and salt content. The fact that the grains used are intact isn't really the most important factor to consider.



### A quick word about calories...

If you carefully count calories you will know all about what I am going to say. Let's say that (according to your trusty Fitbit!) you need about 1800 calories a day. If you like your chocolate, you could choose to consume all of those calories as Mars bars. There are about 230 calories in a 50g Mars Bar, so that's nearly 8 bars in a day. Clearly, not a good plan. Not only are you not going to meet your macros with that, you'll feel sick and totally exhausted after your insulin and blood sugars have peaked and troughed all day.



Calories matter per se but how you take them matters too. On the whole, we are better off eating food that hasn't been highly processed, has a good helping of complex carbs, a decent amount of protein and enough fat and no added salt. Labels will help us to achieve some of these things and will certainly help you to avoid unhealthy products.

Labels create awareness, especially those with the traffic light system, which is used in the UK and some European countries. A red label means a high content (of fat, sugar or salt) and these products are best avoided. Amber is neither high nor low, so mostly amber is fairly good, don't go mad but eat these products sensibly. Green means low fat, sugar or salt so try to keep in the green.

One final point to consider is alcohol.

Alcoholic drinks are made by fermenting and distilling natural starch and sugar. There are seven calories per gram of alcohol (which is nearly as many as in fat). Right now, most alcoholic drinks don't have to have their calorie counts on the labels, so it's best to exercise caution.

Not only are alcoholic drinks high in calories, they are 'empty' calories – that is, they have no nutritional value. Alcohol can't be stored, so our bodies will burn it off as soon as possible and to do this will simply store any other calories which have been consumed in the same 24 hours. A double whammy!



## Conclusion

The take away message is for us all to be very aware of what we are putting in our trollies and ultimately in our bodies.

A great question to ask yourself is '*Is this good for my body?*'? You can have a top of the range, high performance car, but if you put the wrong fuel in – it just won't run very well. The same goes with our bodies. They are a great design, but fuel them poorly and we won't get the best performance.

**Always remember:** A huge amount of money is spent attracting us to food products so we must be discerning shoppers. So know what is good for you and learn not to be seduced by clever advertising and packaging.

I hope this article will help you shop with more confidence and according to your needs.