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# FOOD LABELLING 101

A SUMMARY GUIDE TO NAVIGATING  
FOOD LABELS

# WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR?



The key information to look at on any food label are:

- The ingredients list
- The nutrition panel

These are included on every UK food label under law. To get the best out of a food label, it's important to look at these two bits of information in tandem with one another.

The nutrition panel will give you information about how much of a certain nutrient is in a product, while the ingredients list can help give context as to the source of these nutrients. This can help you decipher whether it's a healthier source of this nutrient or not (e.g. fat coming from nuts/seeds, or from added fats/oils).

Similarly, the nutrition panel will help you understand how much each ingredient is contributing to the total nutritional content (e.g. when sugar is listed in the ingredient list, the nutrition panel can help you decipher the quantity. This is especially useful when more than one type of sugar, for example, has been used (such as honey, cane sugar and dextrose).

# INGREDIENTS LIST VS NUTRITIONAL PANEL

## INGREDIENTS

Ingredient lists must be presented in descending order by weight. This means we can see at a glance what the main ingredients are.

TIP: Look at the first 3-5 ingredients listed - if a source of sugar, fat, or salt is included this high up the list, this likely indicates the product will be high in these ingredients. Aim to avoid this where possible for everyday items, especially when eaten in larger volumes.

## NUTRITIONAL PANEL

As a minimum this must include energy (in kJ + kcal), protein, carbohydrate & fat. Some food labels will also include 'of which sugars', 'of which saturates', fibre & sodium.

These must be stated per 100g, but are also often stated per portion. Be careful not to automatically assume the portion size quoted is what you actually serve yourself!

TIP: Focus on the per 100g column, as this allows easy comparison between products.

# NAVIGATING THE INGREDIENTS LIST

*should i...?*

You will often hear people say that foods with more than five ingredients are "unhealthy". I personally don't agree with this, as it depends entirely on what those ingredients are. However, generally if an ingredients list is particularly extensive, this might indicate the food is more processed, and less nutritionally dense.

Another piece of advice you might hear is to avoid foods with lots of ingredients you can't pronounce or haven't heard of. Again, this depends on how extensive your dietary knowledge is - so I don't think this is always a great tip either. Sometimes ingredients are listed under something other than its "common" name. For example - E300 might seem like a scary additive to you, but in reality, it's just Vitamin C.

*key info*

To keep things simple, look at the first **3-5 ingredients listed**. These are the ingredients the product is mostly made up of.

If sugar, fat/oil or salt (or alternative ingredients to these - see below) are within the first few ingredients, this probably indicates it is best to keep out from your everyday diet. However, as the overused phrase goes: Everything in moderation! It's perfectly fine to include these foods as part of an otherwise nutritionally dense diet!

*other useful info*

This is also where you will find information including:

- Allergens (bolded/highlighted)
- Other ingredients avoided due to specific dietary requirements or ethical reasons (e.g. veganism, gluten-free, palm-oil etc)
- Whether the food contains GMO ingredients (note: there is little evidence to suggest these are harmful, but some may prefer to avoid these)

# NAVIGATING THE INGREDIENTS LIST (continued)

Where the ingredients list may catch you out is in the use of alternative names for products. This is also partly due to regulations stating that the actual ingredient used must be stated. For example, if maple syrup was used this must be stated as so, not simply as "sugar".

Put like that, it makes total sense. However, it would be naive to believe food companies won't exploit this to their advantage. For example, they may use multiple types of sugar, meaning they each fall lower on the ingredients list, despite all contributing to a high sugar content.

This is a perfect example of why we should also look at the nutritional panel, to scope out the total amount of sugar, or other nutrients, present in the product.

common pitfalls

## SUGAR

NB: All sugar (whether white sugar, honey, rice syrup, coconut sugar etc), **is still sugar.**

**-ose:** Glucose, maltose, sucrose, dextrose, fructose, mannose, saccharose etc

**\_\_ sugar:** cane, beet, brown, icing/confectioners, castor, granulated, coconut, date, invert, palm, raw, powdered etc

**Syrup/Nectar:** Date, yacon, rice malt, golden, refiner's, sorghum, barley malt, carob, corn/high fructose corn, agave etc

**Juice:** Cane (dehydrated/evaporated), fruit, grape,

**Others:** Caramel, honey, molasses, dextrin/maltodextrin, treacle

## FAT

**Trans:** [Partially] hydrogenated vegetable oil (avoid if possible)

**Saturated:** Any fat/oil/tallow from animal sources (except fish). Any solid at room temp: shortening, lard, butter, coconut oil.

**Unsaturated:** (unmodified) plant/marine oils, nuts/seeds  
Anything liquid at room temperature.

## SALT

**Salt:** Himalayan pink, sea, rock, kosher

**Sodium:** Disodium/trisodium \_\_, sodium \_\_

**Others:** Meat/yeast extracts, MSG, \_\_ glutamate, hydrolysed \_\_

alternative names

# NAVIGATING THE NUTRITIONAL PANEL

What you focus on will partly depend on your health goals - e.g. if you have a specific condition such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol, you might focus on individual components a little more intently. For overall health, try to look at the product as a whole. This should be used as a rough guide - don't get too caught up in the exact numbers.

FOCUS ON 'PER 100G'

sugar

**AIM: <5-10G PER 100G** (tip: sugar= 5 letters, aim <5g sugar)

Regardless of source, sugar is sugar when added to the product. However, check the ingredients to see if a source of sugar has been added or the sugar is naturally present.

fat

**AIM: <3-10G PER 100G** (tip: fat = 3 letters, aim <3g fat)

Don't be afraid of fat - it plays a key role in satiety & overall health, particularly unsaturated fat from sources such as nuts/seeds, avocado, olive oil, oily fish etc (check the ingredients list!).

You can also look at saturated fat if you prefer: **aim <1.5-3g per 100g**

salt

**AIM: <0.3-1G PER 100G**

This may be listed as 'sodium', in which case **aim <0.12-0.4g per 100g** (divide salt by 2.5 to convert to sodium)

other

**FIBRE:** Aim >30g per day from as many different sources as possible. Packaged foods aren't the best source - base your diet on whole plant-based foods and you'll meet this target!

**PROTEIN:** No specific target. Instead, know your sources (beans, lentils, tofu, eggs, meat, fish etc). Aim for ~1.2-1.5g/kg per day, and 20-30g at each meal.

# OTHER INFORMATION: QUALITY ASSURANCE STANDARDS

UK quality assurance standards certify that certain top tier food standards are met, with the intention that this will increase pressure on all food producers to follow suit. They generally focus more on aspects such as animal welfare and environment.



Food safety standards that applies to eggs that were laid in Britain. Only meets minimum legislative requirements for animal welfare (enriched cages and barn systems are permitted, however now prohibits use of intensive systems, such as 'Combi cages').



Ensures that the fishery that caught the fish has pledged to prevent overfishing and can prove it does not affect other species and ocean habitats, and complies with workers' rights. Certification is subject to change depending on fish stocks. Note: doesn't currently cover animal welfare (e.g. treatment of fish once caught). Seen on: fish/shellfish caught in sea.



Social, economic and environmental standards as part of the Living Wage Coalition. Systems to protect natural biodiversity and resources. Restricts use of certain pesticides, protects against deforestation and soil erosion, . Ensures fair treatment for workers and bans child labour. Seen on: chocolate, tea & coffee etc.



Independent UK scheme which assures high standards of food safety, animal welfare & environmental protection throughout the food chain (farm to pack). Note: does not address all aspects of animal welfare. Seen on: mostly, food grown, processed & packed in the UK - meat, dairy, cereals/flour, fruit/veg, sugar.



Organic and animal welfare standards, such as prohibiting confinement systems, ensuring bedding/environmental enrichment, free-range access, and specifying stunning and slaughter practices. Seen on: a wide range of organic products - dairy, eggs, chocolate, spreads, biscuits etc.



Animal welfare standards. Ensures that animals are offered greater space, bedding and enrichment materials, monitoring of on-farm health and welfare, and that stunning and slaughter processes are specified. Seen on: eggs, fish, chicken, meat etc.



Environmental, economic and social standards that protects farmers and producers, especially from developing countries. Sets minimum market prices and gives additional premiums for community projects, ensures fair and safe working conditions and bans child or forced labour. Also meets environmental criteria such as for water use and minimal pesticide use. Seen on: fruit, chocolate, tea & coffee etc.

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ON FOOD LABELLING  
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