Understanding food labels

Understanding food labeling can help you make healthier food choices. Although we encourage you to choose whole unprocessed foods and avoid packaged processed foods as much as possible, we know that there will be times when this isn't possible. This information is designed to help you understand food labels so you can make educated, healthier choices (1, 2).

Labels can help you track how much fat, salt and added sugars you're eating. Ingredients will be listed in order of the highest quantity used first.

Food Allergy

If you suffer from a food allergy it is important that you check all food labels before consuming any pre-prepared product. In the UK, there are 14 most common allergic ingredients, which will normally be indicated on the label in italics or bold text (1).

If any of these are included in a product, they will be **listed** on the **ingredient list**. These will be emphasised by being in italics or in bold or may be highlighted in a different colour. The ingredients list on the packaging will identify all ingredients in the product.

Nutrient Information on Food Packaging (back or side of packet)

In the UK, it's a legal requirement (3) for food packets over a certain size to show nutrition information. This is usually shown as a table on the back or side of product packaging. Information may be displayed per 100g or 100 mls or per portion size.

A standard food label is based on a daily intake of 2000 calories.

We have broken the information down to help you to understand how to read the label so that you can apply the information to yourself.

Top of Food Label

Nutrition Facts
Serving Size 3 oz. (85g)
Serving Per Container 2

The top of the food label identifies a serving size and how many servings the pack contains

Calories per serving

Amount Per Serving

Calories 200   Calories from Fat 120

% Daily Value*

Here the label identifies the number of calories in one serving and calories that originate from the fat content of this product

This is important information for you to understand to enable you to calculate the amount of calories in the whole pack.

*As you can see this pack contains 2 servings. Each serving is 200 calories so there are 400 calories in the pack.

A Standard Food Label is Based on a Daily Intake of 2000 calories

ories from Fat 120

% Daily Value*

20 %

28 %

A standard food label is based on a daily intake of 2000 calories. The percentage daily value is based on this. If you are aiming to eat a different number of calories in a day the percentage daily intake will not be relevant to you.

Fat content one serving

The food label calculates the amount of fat per portion, the amount of saturated fat and trans fats per portion are also shown as separate measurements

Amount Per Serving	
Calories 200	Calories from Fat 120
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 15g	20 %
Saturated Fat 5g	28 %
Trans Fat 3g	

*If you're taking orlistat or Xenical, understanding where to look for the fat content in a food can be especially helpful to you.

*If you're taking weight loss medication such as xenical or Orlistat it is advised to have no more than 15g of fat per meal, this includes all food items and any dressings. For more information on how to eat whilst taking these medications click on [this link](#).

Other information

Trans Fat 3g		
Cholesterol 30mg		10 %
Sodium 650mg		28 %
Total Carbohydrate 30g		10 %
Dietary Fiber 0g		0 %
Sugars 5g		
Protein 5g		

Cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrate and protein are shown in grams per serving.

Fibre

If a food product has no fibre, such as on the label above, carbohydrates will be absorbed more quickly.

Fibre content of the product is also shown in grams per serving. It is recommended that adults consume a minimum of 30g fibre per day (1, 4). Eating adequate amounts of dietary fibre has been found to benefit your health in many ways including, improving insulin sensitivity, heart health and reducing the risk of having colon cancer, as well as boosting the number of beneficial bacteria in your gut.

To boost fibre intake we recommend that you ensure you include wholegrains, and low glycemic fruits and vegetables in your daily diet.

Food Claims

If there are any food claims about other nutrients, then the amount of these will also be listed here. For example, if the food claims to be a 'source of iron' then the amount of iron contained will be shown.

Traffic light system on front-of-pack

Food front-of-package labels are often designed with a traffic light, red, amber, green colour-coding as well as percentage reference intakes of fat, saturated fat, salt and sugars (5). Not all packets will have this label because labelling the front of the pack isn't legally required.

When included, the front of the packet labels show some key nutrients that are important to keep an eye on for your health and weight management. Amounts are calculated based on an average dietary intake of 2000 calories per day. Percentage amount of the daily requirement of a nutrient is shown based on the average daily intake. The calculations on the nutrition label may also show nutrients per serving of the food, which may be different from the pack size. Check how many servings in a pack.

Information will also provide a use by date and storage information to ensure the food is stored correctly.

The label will normally look like this:
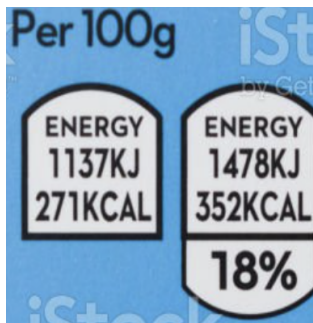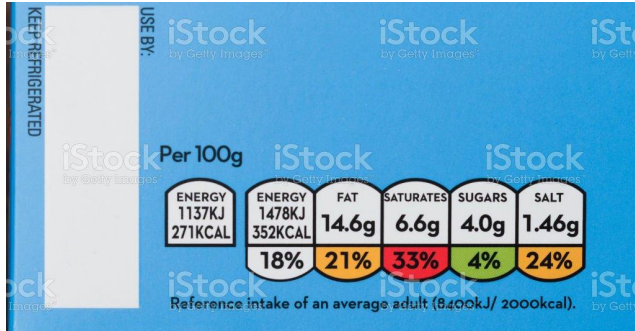
The first white bubble shows energy, or calories, as both the numerical amount of kJ, or kilojoules and kcal, or kilocalories. You'll normally see a percentage below these numbers which indicates how much of an adult's daily reference intake, one portion contains.
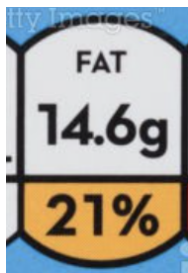
The next bubble represents total fat in a serving (a 100g is a serving in the example shown here).

Saturates means how much of this fat in a serving is saturated fat. The next is total Sugars and the final bubble is for Salt. Each of these will show the grams per serving size of the food. Then below each of these numbers you'll see the percentage this makes up of the recommended adult's daily reference intake for each of these nutrients.
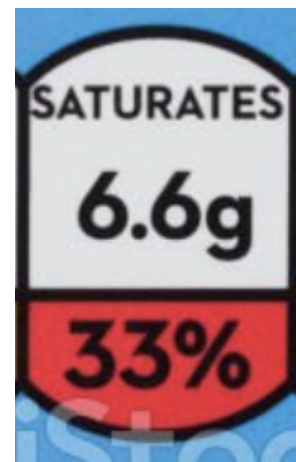
A word on Saturated fats

Saturated fats are those that are solid at room temperature. These are often animal fats - think butter or the white fat that you'll see on something like a pork chop - but also include vegetable fats like coconut or palm oil. Evidence about how much saturated fat is healthy to consume is mixed (6). We recommend that you limit your intake to moderate amounts.

How following the traffic light coding system can help you

The traffic light system will show you at a glance whether a food is high - red, medium - amber, or low - green in each of these nutrients (fats, saturates, sugars, salt).

Red indicates that the product is high in a certain nutrient. This suggests you should eat this food less often or swap to a similar product where this nutrient is coded amber or green.

Amber suggests a medium amount of this nutrient and is considered a food product that is healthier to eat.

Green suggests that this food is considered the healthiest choice and is recommended to be chosen as an option the majority of the time.

If you're opting to eat pre-packaged foods, choose ones that have mainly green or amber ingredients as much as possible, as long as the total intake is under your daily allowance. You may want to use your basal metabolic rate (BMR) as your guide - refer back to Week 2's content to remind yourself of how to work out your BMR.
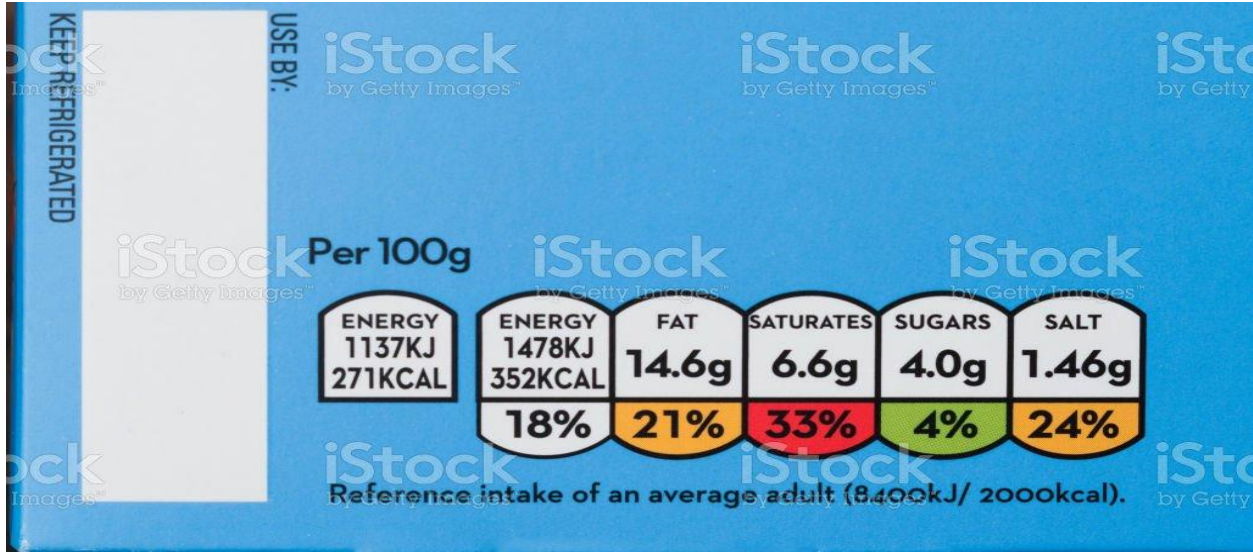
Health and Nutritional Claims On Packaging

Health claims may be something like, 'contains vitamin C, which contributes to normal functioning of the immune system.'

Nutritional claims may be something like 'low fat' or 'no added sugar.'

Either type of claim can only be made if a product meets specific food labelling requirements. This means that any label claims can be proven and should be able to be clearly understood.

Claims will generally only refer to one aspect of the food, or one nutrient, so make sure to read the rest of the label and ingredients to get a clear understanding of what else is in a food product.

References

1. https://www.nutrition.org.uk/putting-it-into-practice/food-labelling/looking-at-labels/
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10.1016/j.appet.2015.05.029. Epub 2015 May 27. PMID: 26025086; PMCID: PMC4499482.

3. https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/packaging-and-labelling

4. Stephen AM, Champ MM, Cloran SJ, Fleith M, van Lieshout L, Mejborn H, Burley VJ. Dietary fibre in Europe: current state of knowledge on definitions, sources, recommendations, intakes and relationships to health. Nutr Res Rev. 2017 Dec;30(2):149-190. doi: 10.1017/S095442241700004X. Epub 2017 Jul 5. PMID: 28676135.

5. Temple NJ, Fraser J. Food labels: a critical assessment. Nutrition. 2014 Mar;30(3):257-60. doi: 10.1016/j.nut.2013.06.012. Epub 2013 Oct 15. PMID: 24139165.

6. Fritsche KL. The science of fatty acids and inflammation. Adv Nutr. 2015 May 15;6(3):293S-301S. doi: 10.3945/an.114.006940. PMID: 25979502; PMCID: PMC4424767.