

Cracking the code: A guide to understanding food labels

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Searching for a healthy product among the myriad of food choices at the supermarket can often leave you feeling confused. Crack the code with this easy 1-2-3 guide to understanding food labels to ensure you choose well.

Although the advertising on food label packages can often be misleading, there is a treasure chest of information for the savvy shopper who flips over the pack and reads the fine print on the back. The information on food labels is regulated by the Australian Government and Food Standards Australia and New Zealand so you can be assured that it will provide you with honest, trustworthy information - if you understand how to read it!

1. Portion distortion

One of the first things to look at is the serving size. This can be found at the top of the Nutrition Information Panel and will describe how many servings should be found in the pack. This means that if there are fifteen servings in the box - you shouldn't eat the whole box in one sitting! Either share the box with fifteen friends, or eat it over the next fifteen days!

Serving sizes have dramatically increased in Australia. Twenty years ago, takeaway coffee was served in a 200ml cup, and was mainly water-based. Maximum energy content, even if full cream milk and sugar were added, was around 400kJ. Today we can buy 470 ml coffees made with full cream milk that contain more than 2000kJ each! Watching your serving sizes will help you to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Four ways to better portion control

1. Weigh out appropriate serving sizes using a set of kitchen scales and choose smaller plates, bowls and spoons.
2. Dish out the recommended portion size, then put the rest of the packet away. Where possible, try to buy smaller packs.
3. Stock your kitchen with snap-lock bags and containers to keep half-opened packets of food fresh.
4. Remember that liquids have recommended portion sizes too - so be mindful of portion sizes of juice, milk and wine.

2. Compare and contrast

The Nutrition Information Panel provides a breakdown of some of the key nutrients in the food so that you can compare different food products. It will always have a 'per serve' column and a 'per 100g/ml' column. All the nutrients in the 'per 100' column can be read as a percentage. This makes it easy to compare the nutrients found in different brands which may have different sized packets. For example, if Brand A contains 12g per 100g of fat (12 per cent fat), and Brand B contains 5g per 100g of fat (5 per cent fat) and you want a food that is lower in fat, you would choose Brand B. Simple!

The Heart Foundation recommends when you read the Nutrition Information Panel, you look for:

1. Less than 600kJ per snack
2. Less than 1.5g saturated fat per 100g

3. Less than 1g per 100g of trans fats
4. Less than 120mg per 100g sodium
5. More than 3g per serve of fibre¹

3. Secret ingredients

Another helpful feature on packaging is the ingredients list. The ingredients list on a label is similar to a recipe - it lists all the ingredients in that product in order of quantity. The ingredients at the top of the list are present in the greatest amount, while the last ingredient is present in the smallest amount. This means you can be sure that the ingredient listed first is the main ingredient found in the product. For example, if sugar is the first ingredient listed, you know the food is going to be mainly comprised of sugar.

Be careful when looking for fat, sugar and sodium in the ingredients list as these can be 'hidden' under different names or 'secret ingredients'.

Secret ingredients

Sugar:

Also known as: honey, sucrose, maltose, lactose, fructose, dextrose, glucose, malt, glucose syrup, corn syrup, monosaccharides, xylitol, polysaccharides, manitol, sorbitol, 'carbohydrates modified', molasses, disaccharides

Fat:

Also known as: Saturated - beef fat, butter fat, shortening, coconut, coconut oil, copha, cream, dripping, lard, mayonnaise, sour cream and palm oil Monounsaturated - Canola, olive oils, peanut oil, avocado, nuts Polyunsaturated - Seeds, sesame, sunflower, safflower, corn, soya bean, grape seed oils, margarines and fish oils

Sodium:

Also known as: salt, monosodium glutamate, meat extract, yeast extract, hydrolysed vegetable protein, meat protein, stock, vegetable salt, baking soda, baking powder.

There's a lot more information to be found on the packaging of your foods. For further assistance to learn how to decipher food labels, contact an Accredited Practising Dietitian.

See www.daa.asn.au for more information.