

Understanding Food Labelling

Planning meals with portion control is an easy way of putting healthy eating into practice. However, portion control alone may not be enough. Some foods are very high in calories and it may be possible to exceed our energy requirements for one day in one single meal, even when having small portions. For this reason, it is recommended that you have some understanding of calories and other nutrition information.

Nutrition				
Typical values (as consumed)	per 100g	per pack	%GDA	your GDA*
Energy	541kJ/128kcal	2011kJ/476kcal	24%	2000kcal
Protein	4.9g	18.2g		
Carbohydrates	20.8g	77.4g		
of which sugars	1.5g	5.6g	6.2%	90g
Fat	2.8g	10.4g	15%	70g
of which saturates	2.3g	8.6g	43%	20g
Fibre	2.1g	7.8g		
Sodium	0.1g	0.5g		
Salt equivalent	0.3g	1.3g	22%	6g

*Recommended guideline daily amounts for adults (GDA)

Most pre-packed foods have a nutrition panel on the back or side of the packaging (see image above). This gives us the nutritional breakdown of the food. The panel usually includes information on energy or calories (kcal), protein, carbohydrate and fat. You may also see information on fibre, sodium, vitamins and minerals.

The information on the panel is given per 100g or 100ml, and sometimes per portion of the food.

Energy

This is the amount of energy that the food has. It is measured in calories (Kcal) or KJ. The current recommended daily intake of calories is 2000 calories for women and 2500 for men.

Protein

Protein is needed for good health. Good sources of protein include meat, fish, eggs, beans, lentils, nuts and dairy foods.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are essential for a healthy body. They provide fuel for our vital organs such as the brain, heart, nervous system and kidneys.

There are different types of carbohydrates:

Simple Carbohydrates: These include added sugars and the natural sugars found in fruit, milk and honey. These are often listed as 'carbohydrates (of which sugars)'.

Complex carbohydrates: These are sometimes known as 'starchy foods' and include bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and cereals.

Fat

There are different types of fats: saturated, unsaturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated. Some of these fats are healthier than others, but they are all equally high in calories.

Saturated Fats

These are the 'bad' fats. They can raise blood cholesterol levels and increase the risks of heart disease. Sources of saturated fats include butter, lard, ghee, dairy foods and processed foods such as pastry, cakes, sausages and ready meals.

Monounsaturated & Polyunsaturated Fats

These are the unsaturated fats. They are beneficial to our health in small amounts as they contain essential fatty acids needed for good health. Good sources of unsaturated fats include oily fish, nuts, seeds, avocados, and oils.

Dietary Fibre

Fibre is also known as bulk or roughage and can play an important role in weight management. This is because:

- Foods high in fibre are digested slowly in our bodies, helping us feel full for longer and control appetite
- High fibre foods tend to be less energy dense, giving us less calories for the same volume of foods

Fibre may also help to keep our bowels healthy and may reduce the amount of cholesterol circulating in the blood.

Low fibre diets can increase the risks of constipation and bowel and colon cancers.

Good sources of fibre includes wholegrain breads and cereals, fruit and vegetables, oats, and pulses such as lentils, peas and beans.

Swapping white bread, pasta, and rice for wholemeal, wholegrain or granary products can help us achieve the recommended amount of fibre intake each day.

Sodium & Salt

Salt is commonly listed as sodium on food labels as salt is a mixture of sodium and chloride. Sodium is the bit that can be bad for our health.

Eating too much salt can increase blood pressure and the risks of heart disease and stroke.

Salt = sodium x 2.5

Most of the salt that we eat comes from processed foods. For this reason, if we want to eat less salt, one of the key things we can do is to cut down on processed, manufactured foods.

Ingredients List

This is a good guide for knowing what is in our food. All ingredients used are commonly listed in descending order of their weight. So, if a particular ingredient is near the top of the list, the food is likely to have lots of it added.

By looking at the ingredients list we can also spot some hidden sugars as it is not always listed as 'sugar'. The following words can be used to describe sugar:

Sucrose	Fructose
Maltose	Glucose
Hydrolysed starch	Syrup
Corn syrup	Honey
Invert sugar	Treacle

Most food additives must be included in the ingredients list. These are sometimes given by their names or by their E number.

The Traffic Lights System (see image below)



The traffic light system uses the colours red, amber and green to show how much energy, sugar, fat, saturated fats and salt a food contain for each serving. The red means high, amber means medium and green means low.

Choosing foods with as many greens as possible and avoiding reds may be an easier way of choosing healthier foods. However, occasionally choosing some foods with red traffic lights is fine too.

In a similar system to traffic light, some of the big supermarkets and food manufacturers may show the nutritional information as percentages of the guideline daily amounts (GDA) for calories, sugar, fat, saturated fats and salt along with the number of grams of each in one serving (see image below).



Packaging Claims

Falsely describing, advertising or presenting food is an offence, and there are a number of laws that help protect consumers against dishonest labelling and misdescription.

However, some claims need to be viewed with caution as some are not well defined by law. In other words, they can mean different things depending on the product.

Example of Claims Without Legal Definition

Pure
Natural
Traditional
Good for you
Unsweetened
Reduced fat
Reduced sugar

A little, Medium, A Lot

The following table gives you information about what is a lot, what is medium and what is low for sugar, fat, saturated fat and salt per 100g of food. This information is based on national guidelines provided by the Food Standards Agency.

	Sugar	Fat	Saturated fat	Salt
What is high	15g or over	20g or over	5g or over	1.5g or over
What is medium	5g – 15g	3g – 20g	1.5g – 5g	0.3g – 1.5g
What is low	5g or less	3g or less	1.5g or less	0.3g or less

A Word About Carbohydrates

Low carbohydrate or 'low carbs' diets are very popular for weight loss and amongst some gym-goers.

There is much misconception about carbs being fattening. As we many things, eating too much will lead to weight gain, regardless of what foods you eat. In fact, gram per gram, carbohydrates contain fewer calories than protein, alcohol and fat.

1 gram of carbohydrate = 3.75 calories

1 gram of protein = 4 calories

1 gram of alcohol = 7 calories

1 gram of fat = 9 calories

Carbohydrates are essential for good health. Not having enough starchy foods restricts intake of important nutrients and increases the risks of constipation and bowel and colon cancers.

The best sources of carbohydrates are complex, unrefined starchy foods as they are a good source of fibre too. For instance, whole grain breads, cereals and pasta.

But not all carbs are equal. When grains are refined to make white bread and white flours, the fibre is removed. For this reason, they are not as good for our health.

Simple carbohydrates such as sugars do not contain many other nutrients. For this reason, they just provide 'empty calories' to our food.