

Food Labels

Understanding food labels helps you identify useful information to make shopping for healthy foods easier. Each food group has specific nutrient criteria you should look for. For example, there is no point in looking for fibre in dairy, as there won't be any, unless it's from the fruit added to yoghurt or a smoothie.

Guidelines to use are:

- Snack: energy, sugar, fat and salt
- Dairy: fat, energy and salt
- Breads and cereals: fibre and salt
- Meats - fat and salt

Nutrition Information Panel

All food packages are required to display a nutrition information panel. Very small packages such as herbs, spices, teas and coffees are exempt. All nutrition information panels are required to display nutrients per average serve and per 100g of the product. The nutrients required include energy, protein, fat (total and saturated), carbohydrates (total and sugars), sodium and any nutrient the manufacturer makes a claim about (see muesli bar example below.)

Food Additives

Food additives are added in small amounts to foods to ensure nutrient content, preserve the food, or make the food more appealing in colour, texture, flavour or appearance. All approved additives have undergone rigorous safety testing by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) and are added in the smallest amount possible. For more information go to: <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au>

Genetically Modified Foods

Foods can now be genetically modified. Reasons may include:

- 1) Making crops resistant to pesticides or drought
- 2) Increasing nutrient levels in foods
- 3) Making foods more resistant to spoilage

There are currently six genetically modified foods in the Australian food supply that have undergone strict safety and allergen testing by FSANZ. These foods are derived from soy, corn, cottonseed, canola, sugar beet and potatoes. Food labels are required to disclose if a food contains genetically modified material. This information is usually contained in the ingredient list. The laws allow exemptions for restaurant and takeaway meals and foods with little or no genetically modified material in the final product.

Compare the serving size to your own serve size – we tend to eat more than suggested.

When comparing two different brands of the same product, use the per 100g column as the serving sizes will probably differ between the two foods.

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION		
Serving Size: 1 bar (40g)		
	Per bar	Per 100g
Energy	650kJ (155 Cal)	1625kJ (385 Cal)
Protein	2g	5g
Fat, total	4g	10g
saturated	2g	5g
Carbohydrates, total	29g	73g
sugars	15g	38g
Dietary fibre	2g	5g
Sodium (salt)	5mg	12mg

Ingredients: Wholemeal flour, honey (18%), dates, rolled oats, vegetable oil, apple puree (6.3%), sugar, desiccated coconut, emulsifier (lecithin), walnuts, humectant (sorbitol), spices

Always look at the total fat. Choose products with low levels of saturated and trans fat. Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are good fats and should form the basis of your fat intake.

Carbohydrates include both sugars and starches. If a product contains a large amount of sugar, look at the ingredients list to determine if it is added or natural sugar.

Products that are a good source of fibre have at least 4g of fibre per serve.

Excess sodium may cause adverse effects on health. Choose low salt or no-added salt varieties. (Aim for less than 120mg/100g)

Ingredients are required to be listed from 'most to least'. The ones at the end of the list are often present in only small amounts.

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Nutrient Claims

Manufacturers often make claims on labels to emphasise a particular nutrient (e.g. low in salt). These claims must comply with an industry code of practice, so that a claim means the same thing no matter what product it is displayed on (see table below).

Nutrient Claim	Means the food must contain...
Good source of fibre	4g (or more) fibre per serve
Reduced fat	At least 25% less fat than the full fat product
Low fat	3g of total fat (or less) per 100g of food or 1.5g fat per 100ml of liquid food
Fat free	0.15g (or less) of fat per 100g
Light or Lite	May refer to the product's energy content, fat content, weight, colour, or texture. This claim is often unreliable.
Reduced Salt	At least 25% less sodium/salt than the full salt product
No added sugar	The only sugars present in the food are those naturally occurring such as fructose in fruit and lactose in dairy products. No additional sugar may be present.
Low salt/sodium	120mg (or less) of salt/sodium per 100g or 50% less than full salt product

Source: Food Standards Australia and New Zealand, Final Assessment Report Proposal, P293, Nutrition and Health Related Claims, 11 April 2008

The difference between use by date and best before date

Foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have a 'best before' or 'use-by' date. These terms mean different things.

Best before date: refers to the quality of the food – food stored in the recommended way will remain of good quality until that date. It may still be safe to eat certain foods after the 'best before' date, but they may have lost quality and some nutritional value.

Use by date: foods that should not be consumed after a certain date for health and safety reasons and cannot be sold after that date. You will find 'use-by' dates on perishables such as meat, fish and dairy products. You shouldn't eat any food that is past its 'use-by' date, even if it looks and smells okay.

Some foods carry the date they were manufactured or packed, rather than a 'use-by' date, so you can tell how fresh the food is. For example, bread and meat can be labeled with a 'baked on' or 'packed on' date.