



How to interpret food labels

*Low in salt. 99% fat free. No artificial colours or preservatives.
No added sugar. Good source of fibre...*

We understand, food labels can be very tricky to understand. Luckily due to the strict guidelines enforced in Australia, all food products sold must declare and note all ingredients used to make a certain product, particularly due to allergies. However, what confuses us as consumers, which can impact on our healthy eating goals, is how food products are marketed which includes what you see on the food packaging or in the media.

The good news is that in order to determine whether a food product is the best choice for you, you only need to look at two components: the ingredients list and the nutrition information panel.



INGREDIENTS LIST

All ingredients in a food product must be listed from largest to smallest by weight.

Therefore, the first 3 ingredients make up the largest proportion of the food product. Generally, if you see the words "fat, salt or sugar" in the first three ingredients, it would not be the best food choice. However, if the first ingredient is >80% wholegrains such as All Bran, it is okay to have these ingredients listed next. Understanding the ingredients list is particularly important for those who would like to lose weight or maintain their current healthy weight, as it helps them make healthier food choices.



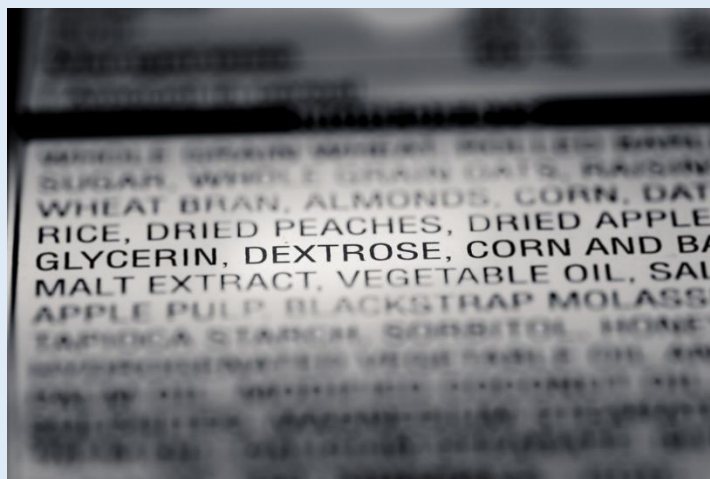


Unfortunately, some food companies like to be 'tricky' and list fat, salt and sugar by alternative names to make it less obvious that certain food products are high in these ingredients. Examples include:

Fat – vegetable oil, lard, butter, margarine, milk solids, ghee, copha, palm oil

Sugar – honey, dextrose, maltose, glucose, raw sugar, brown sugar, sucrose, maple syrup

Salt – vegetable salt, lite salt, MSG, rock salt, sea salt, sodium chloride, sodium nitrate, stock cubes



NUTRITION INFORMATION PANEL

In combination with reading the ingredients list, it is also important to interpret the nutrition information panel.

All nutrition information panels (NIPs) in Australia must by law, note these components. However, if a food package makes a health claim such as 'High in Fibre' or 'High in Calcium', you will be able to see that in the panel as well.



Each NIP has two columns which are the 'per serve' and 'per 100g' column. When interpreting the values, it is best to look at the 'per 100g' column, even if you don't eat that amount, but at least it is similar to what percentage of each component the food product is made out of and you can compare similar products easily, such as breakfast cereals.

Quite often, food companies will make their 'per serve' quantity smaller than what the typical individual would have, to make the food product look 'healthier'.





It can be difficult to interpret all the different numbers in a NIP, but as a general guideline, if you follow the recommendations below you are more likely to make a healthier food choice. It is important to understand that we need to look at the food products as a whole, not isolate certain components such as fat, in order to make the best choice.

	Good	Okay	Limit
Fat	<10g/100g		>10g/100g
Saturated Fat	<2g/100g		>2g/100g
Fat in Dairy foods	<2g/100ml		>2g/100ml
Cheese	<20g/100g		>20g/100g
Sugar	<10g/100g	10–15g/100g	>15g/100g
Sugar (if the food product contains dried fruit)	<25g/100g		>25g/100g
Sugar in drinks	<5g/100ml	5–7.5g/100ml	>7.5g/100ml
Fibre (eg. breads and cereals)	>5g/100g		<5g/100g
Fibre (in snacks eg. crispbreads or muesli bars)	>3g/100g		<3g/100g
Sodium	<120mg/100g Low salt	120–400mg/100g	>400mg/100g High salt
Sodium (in cheese)		<800mg/100g	>800mg/100g
Omega 3s in canned fish	>200mg/100g		

It may initially take longer to do your grocery shopping by reading the labels, however once you practice you too will be an expert! So good luck and happy shopping ☺



Need help interpreting food labels?

This article was written by OSCAR Hospitality Dietitian, Simone Karafilis.
Please call or email via our contact details below.

References: <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/eating-well/how-understand-food-labels>
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