

The Nutrition Code

Label Reading Guidelines

When it comes to healthy eating, it's best to include as many unpackaged, wholefood options as possible. However, if you know what to look for, you can find equally nutritious and convenient options in the supermarket. The trick is - learning how to read food label!

We have listed a few quick tips that will help you make the best choice for your health, and avoid unnecessary saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and kilojoules.

Tip One: Understanding the Nutrition Information Panel (NIP)

One of the first things people turn to when assessing the quality of a food product is the Nutrition Information Panel (NIP). Various institutions, such as Baker IDI, the Heart Foundation and the Dietitians Association of Australia have developed healthy criteria for NIPs, and these are:

- Saturated fat: <2g/100g as best choice, or less than 30% of the total fat content per 100g (i.e. in a product with 10g/100g total fat, aim for <3g/100g saturated fat)
- Sugars: <15g/100g as best choice, or <20g/100g if the food product contains fruit as a primary ingredient (i.e. an untoasted muesli)
- Sodium: <120mg/100g best choice, and <400mg/100g as acceptable choice
- Fibre: >5g/100g, only applicable to grain products such as bread, cereal, crackers, pasta, grains.
- Kilojoules: Aim for <600kJ/serve for snacks, and <2,000kJ/serve for ready meals (i.e. frozen meals)

Once you have compared a food product to the above criteria, you can also use the NIP to compare this product to similar products. Opt for the product containing less saturated fat, sodium (salt), sugars and kilojoules, and more fibre. Use the per serve column to compare items in single serve packaging (i.e. single yoghurts or muesli bars), and the per 100g column to compare items without single serve packaging (i.e. cereals, table spreads). /

Often products will meet some, but not all, health criteria. Either continue looking for other options, or choose the closest match.

Tip 2: Reading the Ingredients List

All ingredients in a food product must be listed in order from highest percentage weight to smallest percentage weight. Look for products with the least number of added sugars, saturated fats and salt in the ingredients list. Or, aim for these to be further down the list. As a rule, if added sugars, saturated fats or salts appear in the first three ingredients of a food product, it may not be a healthy choice.

To help you identify undesirable ingredients on a food label, we have listed a few to look out for:

- **Saturated Fat:** Butter, cream, coconut oil, hydrogenated oil, vegetable oil, palm oil, shortening, milk solids, milk powder, cocoa butter

- **Added Sugar:** Sucrose, sugar, raw sugar, cane sugar, organic sugar, brown sugar, honey, agave nectar, molasses, fruit juice concentrate, dextrose, fructose, glucose, golden syrup, rice syrup, corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, maltose, maltodextrin, rice malt, barley malt
- **Salt:** Celery/garlic/vegetable salt, glutamate, mineral salts, monosodium glutamate (MSG), rock salt, sodium, sodium bicarbonate

Lastly, if a food product contains a high number of ingredients you do not recognize (i.e. thickeners, fillers, colours), this may suggest a lower nutrient density. We suggest looking for products with fewer, predominantly wholefood ingredients.

Tip 3: Using the Health Star Rating (HSR) system

The Health Star Rating (HSR) system appears on the front of some food products. It was designed by the Australian Government and interested parties, to help make healthy shopping easier for consumers. The more stars, the healthier the choice.

Generally, the HSR will provide an accurate comparison between similar food products, for example, when comparing packaged breakfast cereals. However, not all products have paid to advertise the HSR. So, by selecting products based on the HSR alone, you may be missing out on healthier 'unrated' options. For this reason, we recommend you don't rely on the HSR - read the NIP and the ingredients lists of multiple products when searching for the healthiest option.

Also, be aware that each food category has different criteria, so the stars cannot be used to compare foods from different categories. For example – a muesli bar with added sugars and a tin of tuna in spring water may receive a similar star rating, even though the tuna is a healthier option.

Tip 4: Nutrition Content Claims

Sometimes labels will include nutrition content claims like 'low fat', 'reduced salt' or 'high fibre'. These claims can only be used if the food meets certain criteria. For example, with a 'good source of calcium' claim, the food must contain more than a set amount of calcium.

While nutrition content claims can generally guide you to healthier choices, it is important to check the claim by looking at the Nutrition Information Panel. For example, products carrying 'low fat' claims may be higher in sugar or total kilojoules when compared with similar products.

Tip 5: Debunking Health Claims

Different to nutrition content claims, health claims link a food, or a nutrient or substance in a food, to a health effect. There are two types of health claims:

- **General level health claims** refer to a nutrient or substance in a food and its effect on a health function. For example: *calcium is good for bones and teeth.*
- **High level health claims** refer to a nutrient or substance in a food and its relationship to a serious disease or to a biomarker of a serious disease. For example, *plant sterols can lower cholesterol.*

Health claims on food packaging are regulated by a government body called Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), and are usually based on truth, although can be misleading or over exaggerated. We recommend you regard these health claims, but continue to judge a food's health value based on the NIP and ingredients list first and foremost – **as these always speak the truth!**