



FACT SHEET:

Understanding food labels

Labels on packaged foods provide information that can help you make healthier food choices.

Making healthy food choices can help you to manage your diabetes, weight, and overall health. Understanding how to read food labels can help you choose foods with more fibre and less saturated fat, salt (sodium), added sugars and kilojoules. Food labels will typically include a nutrition information panel, list of ingredients, the 'use by' or 'best before' date and identify potential food allergens and additives.

Food labels also tell you the amount of carbohydrates (carbs) you eat and drink. This can help you manage your blood glucose levels.

Nutrition information panel

The two most useful tools on a food package are the nutrition information panel and the ingredients list.

The nutrition information panel helps you to compare similar products and choose healthier options.

Here is an example of a nutrition information panel.

When you read the nutrition information panel, check the serving size, the quantity per 100 grams (g) column, the amount of energy (kilojoules), and the amount of fat, carb and sodium in the product. These components are explained here.

Nutrition Facts	
Per 3/4 cup (29 g)	
Amount	% Daily Value
Calories	110
Fat 1 g*	2 %
Saturated 0.3 g	6 %
+ Trans 0 g	0 %
Cholesterol 0 mg	0 %
Sodium 180 mg	9 %
Carbohydrate 23 g	5 %
Fibre 2 g	4 %
Sugars 10 g	20 %
Protein 2 g	4 %
Vitamin A	0 %
Vitamin C	10 %
Calcium	30 %

Serving size

This is the average serving size of the product from the manufacturer. Check whether your serving size is the same as the recommended serving size. If your serve is smaller or larger, you will need to take this into account.

Energy

The energy the body uses is measured in kilojoules (kJ) or calories (cal). The amount of energy an individual needs will vary from person to person. Choosing products with fewer kilojoules can help with weight loss and prevent weight gain.

Fat

'Total fat' includes all polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, saturated and trans fats in the food. It's important to consider both the amount and the type of fat in the foods you choose.

Check the 'saturated fat' amount on similar products and choose the one with the least amount of saturated fat per 100 g.

'Trans fats' are not required by law to be listed on the nutrition information panel but some manufacturers do list trans fats. Look for products with less than 1 g of trans fats per 100 g, particularly when buying margarines or baked goods.

Carbohydrate

'Total carbohydrate' (carb) includes both the sugars and the starches. This figure is useful if you count carbs to help manage your blood glucose levels. To work out the amount of carb in food use the per serve column or the per 100 g column. You may need to adjust this to suit your serving size.

The 'sugars' amount tells you how much of the total carb is made up of sugars. It includes both added sugars as well as natural sugars in the food such as lactose in milk, and fructose in fruit.

Remember, it is the total amount of carb in a food that affects blood glucose levels, not just the 'sugars'.

A dietitian can help you work out how much carb you need each day to manage your diabetes and meet your energy and nutritional needs.

Sodium

This number tells you how much salt (sodium) is in the food. Sodium in your diet can affect your blood pressure. Where possible, choose products with 'reduced' or 'no added' salt. A low-salt food has less than 120 mg of sodium per 100 g. When comparing similar products, choose the one with the lowest sodium per 100 g.

Percentage (%) daily intake

Some manufacturers may choose to include information about percentage (%) daily intake. This uses to compare the nutrients in one serve of the food with what an 'average adult' needs. This is just a guide. Your daily intake may be higher or lower depending on your energy needs.

Making healthy food choices

To decide whether a food is a healthy choice, compare products and ask yourself these questions:

Does the food contain ingredients you would cook with at home?

If the ingredient list is full of things that you do not recognise as food, it is probably best left on the shelf.

Is the food an 'everyday' or a 'sometimes' food?

Fill your shopping trolley with a variety of 'everyday' healthy foods, such as fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, legumes, lean meats and poultry, fish or seafood, nuts, seeds, and low-fat dairy. Reduce the amount of 'sometimes' foods like chocolate, crisps, sweet biscuits and soft drinks.

Is the food low in saturated fat?

Compare similar products and choose those with the least amount of saturated fat per 100 g.

Is the food low in sodium?

Healthier options have less than 120 mg of sodium per 100 g. Where possible, choose products that have 'reduced salt' or 'no added salt'.

Is the food high in fibre?

Not all labels show the fibre content, but high fibre foods have at least more than 3 g of dietary fibre per 100 g. When comparing similar products, choose the one higher in fibre per 100 g. This is particularly important for foods like breads and cereals. It is recommended that adults aim for at least 25 – 30 g of fibre each day.

Ingredients list

All packaged foods must have an ingredients list on their label. The ingredient that weighs the most is listed first, and the ingredient that weighs the least is listed last.

You can use this information to help you decide whether the product is a healthy choice.

Nutrition claims

Food manufacturers often use nutrition claims on their packaging to attract the shopper's attention. While the claim may be true, it can sometimes be misleading. Always check the nutrition information panel to see if the product itself is a healthy option for you.

Here are some common claims from food manufacturers and what they mean.

High fibre

The food must contain at least 3 g of fibre per average serving.

Reduced salt

The product contains at least 25% less salt than the regular product. However, the reduced salt version may still have a high salt content, so always check the nutrition information panel and compare similar products.

No added salt

Salt has not been added.

Low salt

The food has less than 120 mg of sodium per 100 g.

Low joule or diet

The product usually contains alternative sweeteners and may also be low in fat. You can check this in the ingredient list or nutrition panel.

No added sugar

The product contains no added sugars (such as sucrose, honey or glucose). The product may still contain natural sugars, such as lactose (in milk), fructose (in fruit) or other carbs, which can affect your blood glucose levels.

Low fat or 97% fat free

The food must contain no more than 3 g of fat per 100 g of food, or no more than 1.5 g fat per 100 ml of liquid.

Reduced fat

The product contains at least 25% less fat than the regular product. This does not necessarily mean it is low in fat.

Lite or light

This may refer to a reduced fat content, but it may also be used to describe taste, texture or colour. For example, light olive oil is lighter in colour and taste but not lower in fat. Check for an explanation on the label and compare fat content per 100 g with similar products.

Nutrition claims on food products

If a product includes a nutrition claim about a specific nutrient on the package, it must list the amount in the nutrition information panel. For example, if it makes a claim about dietary fibre, the amount of fibre must be listed in the panel.



More information and support

- Go to ndss.com.au to search for 'Glycaemic index', 'Carbohydrate counting', 'Making healthy food choices' and other fact sheets.
- Go to ndss.com.au to access the Carb Counting online program and to search for other NDSS programs and services in your state or territory, or online.
- Call the NDSS Helpline on **1800 637 700** and ask to speak to a dietitian.
- The Healthy Shopping Guide is your essential supermarket companion to help you make healthy food choices. To order a copy, call the NDSS Helpline on **1800 637 700**.
- Go to dietitiansaustralia.org.au or call Dietitians Australia on **1800 812 942** to find a dietitian. A dietitian can help you decide on the best food and product choices for you.
- For more information about understanding food labels, go to foodstandards.gov.au.
- For more information on Health Star Ratings go to healthstarrating.gov.au.



Top tips

- Understanding food labels can help you to make healthy food choices, which is an important part of managing your diabetes, weight, and overall health.
- Food manufacturers often use nutrition claims on their packaging to attract the shopper's attention. While the claim may be true, it can sometimes be misleading. Always check the nutrition information panel to see if the product itself is a healthy option for you.
- If you count carbs to help manage your blood glucose levels, the nutrition panel on a food label can help you to work out the amount of carbs in the food and drinks you choose.
- A dietitian can help you decide on the best food and product choices for your individual nutrition needs.

Notes

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The NDSS and you

Whether you have just been diagnosed with diabetes, or have been living with diabetes for a while, the NDSS provides a range of support services, information, and subsidised products to help you manage your diabetes, stay healthy and live well. For access to more resources (including translated versions), or to find out more about support services, go to **ndss.com.au** or call the NDSS Helpline on **1800 637 700**.

This information is intended as a guide only. It should not replace individual medical advice and if you have any concerns about your health or further questions, you should contact your health professional.