

## Food Labels

The following are some key points to help you understand the information contained on Food Labels so you can make informed decisions about the food you buy.

### Ingredients list

The ingredient with the largest quantity by weight is listed first and the ingredient with the smallest quantity is listed last. So if sugar is listed first the product will be very high in sugar.

If an ingredient is less than 5% of the contents it does not have to be listed eg water.

If a composite food is less than 5% it can be listed without ingredients, eg tomato sauce which would not need to list that it contains tomatoes, capsicum, onions, water and herbs.

Be aware that sometimes sugars are listed by other names. These can include sucrose, brown sugar, caster sugar, dextrose, fructose, glucose, golden syrup, honey, lactose, malt, maltose, maple syrup, molasses and raw sugar. The total sugars are given in the nutrition information panel.

Fats might be listed as animal oil, beef fat, butter fat, copha, lard, milk solids, palm oil, shortening, tallow or vegetable oil. Again check the nutrition information panel for total fats and remember all fats have the same kilojoules per gram.

### Comparing products

On the nutrition information panel (NIP) you will find a list of the seven major nutrients – energy (expressed as kilo joules), protein, total fat, saturated fat, total carbohydrates, sugars and sodium – with amounts of each per serve and per 100g. This information helps us compare different products.

If a claim is made about other nutrients these may also be included in the NIP. For example cereals may include the B vitamins thiamine, riboflavin, niacin and folate, as well as fibre, potassium, magnesium and iron in their NIP.

If products have the same serving size you can use the per serve column. Often they don't so use the per 100g column. Look at both the breakdown of different nutrients and the total amount, eg saturated fat + monounsaturated fat = total fat.

### How much is too much?

It's all very well knowing the amount of a particular nutrient that a food contains but how much is too much? Here is a guide:

High content per 100g

30g Sugars (bad)

20g Fat (bad)

520mg Sodium (salt) (bad)

3g Fibre (good)

Low content per 100g

10g Sugars (good)

3g Fat (good)

120mg Sodium (salt) (good)

0.5g Fibre (bad)

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) of Australia recommends that Australian adults consume less than 2,300mg of sodium per day which is equivalent to about 6,000mg (6 g) of salt (sodium chloride). I think this is too much and we should consume less than 1,600mg of sodium a day.

It is acceptable to consume 20-35% of our daily energy from fats, with saturated fats providing no more than 10% of energy intake. Trans fats should be avoided.

Sugar in all its forms should contribute about 10% of energy intake.

### What does 'reduced' mean?

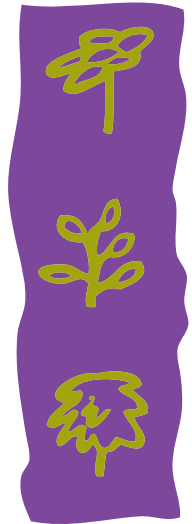
If a label claims a product is 'reduced' it must contain 25% less of the claimed substance than the manufacturer's normal product. However you need to check the label carefully because even reduced can mean too much.

Fat free is less than 0.15g per 100g of the food.

### Percentage Daily Intake (PDI)

Some food packages have 'balloons' on the front that represent percentage of daily intake of particular ingredients. This is a food industry initiative and as such is designed to convince consumers that their products are good for you.

The question you might ask is 'recommended daily intake for whom?' You have to turn the packet to the nutrition information panel, get out your magnifying glass and you will find the statement 'Percentage Daily Intakes are based on the average adult diet of 8700kJ. Your Daily Intakes may be higher or lower depending on your energy needs'.



**How many kilojoules do you need?** You won't find this information on the pack.

Gender	Height	Age	Weight	Activity	kJ per day
Female	1.6m	31-50	60kg	Sedentary	7600
				Moderate	9800
Male	1.9m	31-50	80kg	Sedentary	8300
				Moderate	10700

**Sedentary** means seated work with little or no strenuous leisure activity.

**Moderate** activity means standing or walking at work or sedentary work with regular exercise of at least 30 minutes a day (from [www.healthyfoodguide.com.au](http://www.healthyfoodguide.com.au)).

It is in the food industry's interest to use PDIs not the interest of consumers. In the UK there has been an enormous fight from the food industry against the introduction of 'traffic light' labels. The goal of this system is to help consumers make healthy food choices – a red light means the food is too high in fat, saturated fat, sugar or salt; yellow/amber means medium content; and green means low content. How easy would that be for those of us responsible for making food choices?

However under the traffic light system Nutrigrain, Kellogg's big seller breakfast cereal would get green lights for fats and red lights for sugar and salt. Kelloggs has led the fight against the traffic light labels because they will either lose sales or have to change their recipe. There is an excellent article by a Tasmanian academic on this topic available on the web. See the University of Tasmania website [www.saltmatters.org](http://www.saltmatters.org) and click on Traffic Light Labels.

### Recent warnings on food colours

As of July 2010 European foods containing the following food colours must contain a warning on the label stating that the particular food colour may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children. The research behind this warning prompted Aldi supermarkets in Australia to remove these colours from their exclusive brands. The Australian government is yet to require similar warnings on our food labels.

The colours affected by the European warning are:

Sunset yellow	E110
Carmoisine	E122
Tartrazine	E102
Ponceau 4	E124
Quinoline yellow	E104
Allura red AC	E129

In addition to these Aldi removed eight other food colours used in Australian foods sold in their supermarkets:

Amaranth purple	123
Erythrosine cherry red	127
Indigo blue	132
Brilliant blue	133
Green	142
Green	143
Black	151
Brown	155

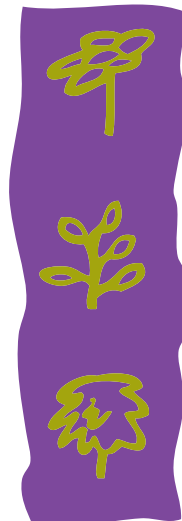
I strongly recommend you check food labels for these numbers and choose something else!

### Allergy foods

A small number of foods are responsible for a large proportion of allergic responses. The main foods are:

- Crustaceans (seafoods)
- Eggs
- Fish
- Milk – cows
- Peanuts
- Soybeans
- Tree nuts
- Sesame seeds
- Gluten – a protein found in wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt but not rice, corn, millet, buckwheat, quinoa, etc.
- Sulphites (mainly preservatives in the 200 group of food additives).

A true allergy has the potential to be catastrophic, that is a person can die from their reaction to eating these foods. For others the reaction is milder and more uncomfortable than dangerous. Many people are intolerant rather than allergic, but that is a topic for another time.



Foods containing these ingredients are required to include warnings on labels such as 'contains gluten'. Many manufacturers also include a warning such as 'may contain traces of tree nuts'. This means that the tree nuts are not an ingredient of the product but the product may have come into contact with the tree nuts, for example because it was made on the same equipment used in the manufacture of another product that contained tree nuts. Such statements are not specific and are probably over used to cover the manufacturer from liability rather than help people with allergies.

This is a huge topic. I hope this introduction is useful in helping you read and understand the information contained on food labels. The following sources provide more detail and explanations. I particularly recommend the Australian book by Judy Davie, the Radio National program and the Tasmanian University article on traffic light labels.

## Sources

### ABC Radio National

Background Briefing 18 April 2010 – 'Food fears'

This program looked at a number of food label issues including for example prawns from China labelled Made in Australia, the lack of government checks of company claims for the safety of genetically modified foods, and what is meant by the terms 'free range' and 'bred free range'. See <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/backgroundbriefing/stories/2010/2871237.htm>.

### Allergy New Zealand

[www.allergynz.org.nz](http://www.allergynz.org.nz)

See their Food Allergen Labelling Guide at the bottom of the Education Sector page.

### Better Health Channel

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

This is a Victorian government site covering a range of health and lifestyle topics. It has a comprehensive section on food and nutrition including information on fats, salt and sugar.

**Davie, J 2008, *Read the Label: The Complete Guide to Buying the Best Food in Australian Shops*, Ebury Press, North Sydney**

This is a readily available and excellent guide to understanding food labels. The author is a strong promoter of fresh food sourced from farmers' markets, organic food stores, and

independent specialty stores such as delicatessens, butchers, fishmongers and green grocers. In reading labels the author recommends we ask what's in it, how much is in it, and is it going to do me any good?

### [www.foodprocessing.com](http://www.foodprocessing.com)

This is the site of the American food and beverage industry and includes an article on the British research behind the European warnings regarding certain food colours. Search for colorants and choose 'When it comes to synthetic food colors: Beware the 'Southampton Six'' or see [www.foodprocessing.com/articles/2010/colorants.html](http://www.foodprocessing.com/articles/2010/colorants.html)

### Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ)

[www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au)

This is the site for the Australian government's regulatory agency covering things like food safety, additives, labelling, and GM (genetically modified) foods.

### [www.healthyfoodguide.com.au](http://www.healthyfoodguide.com.au)

This site has some useful tools to help with healthy eating including a label reading guide. See Tools > Label reading guide

### NSW Food Authority

[www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au](http://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au)

This site has useful information on nutrition labelling. See For consumers > Food labels > Label facts > Nutrition labelling

### [www.truthinlabelling.com.au](http://www.truthinlabelling.com.au)

This site raises 3 areas of concern in labelling foods in Australia – Australian made, palm oil and aseptic juice. The independent senator Nick Xenophon and the Australian Citrus Reform Association are behind the website. The site includes proposed amendments to food regulations currently before Federal Parliament to improve truth in labelling.

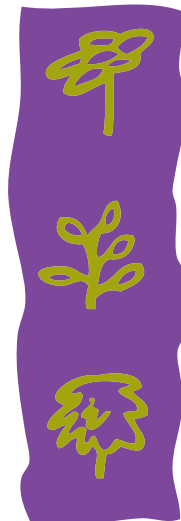
### University of Tasmania Salt Matters

[www.saltmatters.org](http://www.saltmatters.org)

This site includes the link to the excellent article on Traffic Light labels.

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