

# Understanding Food Labels Without Fear

## Information for safety and choice

A food label can help identify allergens, ingredients, storage instructions and nutritional information. It does not tell you whether you are good, disciplined or healthy. Read the part that answers your question, then allow yourself to stop.

## Start with your purpose

Before turning the whole packet, ask what you need to know. Allergy safety requires a different check from comparing prices, identifying an ingredient or understanding storage. A clear purpose reduces overload and prevents neutral numbers becoming a test.

## The name and description

The legal or customary name helps identify what the product actually is. A marketing phrase on the front may emphasise one feature, while the description nearby gives more useful detail about preparation, filling or flavour.

## Ingredients list

Ingredients are generally listed in descending order by weight at the time of manufacture. Compound ingredients may have their own components in brackets. The list can help with allergies, intolerances, religious or ethical choices, but unfamiliar chemical-sounding words do not automatically mean a food is unsafe.

### Additives and E numbers

Authorised additives perform functions such as preservation, colouring, thickening or maintaining texture. An E number means the additive has been assessed for permitted use in Europe; it is not a warning score. Individual allergies or sensitivities still need appropriate advice.

## Allergen information

In the UK, the 14 regulated allergens must be emphasised in the ingredients list when deliberately used, commonly through bold type. "May contain" statements describe possible unintended cross-contact. The safest choice depends on the diagnosed allergy and advice from the allergy team.

- Read the label every time because recipes and factories can change.
- Check both the ingredients list and precautionary allergen statement.
- Do not rely only on "free-from" shelf location or familiar packaging.
- For loose food or eating out, ask the business for allergen information.
- Never test a suspected allergen without appropriate medical guidance.

## Allergy is different from intolerance

Food allergy involves the immune system and may be life-threatening. Intolerance does not usually cause anaphylaxis but can still be significant. Coeliac disease is an autoimmune condition requiring strict gluten avoidance. A general label-reading guide cannot replace an individual safety plan.

## Emergency reminder

Breathing difficulty, swelling of the tongue or throat, collapse or suspected anaphylaxis is an emergency. Follow the person's plan, use prescribed adrenaline promptly and call 999.

## Date labels

### Use by

A use-by date relates to safety. Do not eat food after this date, even if it looks or smells acceptable. Follow storage instructions.

### Best before

A best-before date mainly concerns quality. Food may remain safe after it when stored correctly, although quality may decline. Eggs are an exception requiring specific handling guidance.

## Storage and preparation

Instructions about refrigeration, freezing, reheating and use after opening can be more important to immediate safety than the nutrition panel. Follow them carefully, especially for vulnerable people.

## Nutrition information

Most packaged foods show energy, fat, saturates, carbohydrate, sugars, protein and salt, commonly per 100 g or 100 ml and sometimes per portion. Per-100 information allows like-for-like comparison. Per-portion figures depend on the manufacturer's stated portion and may not match what an individual needs or eats.

### Energy

Kilojoules and kilocalories describe energy, not food quality or personal worth. Energy needs vary with age, body, health, activity, growth, recovery and many other factors.

### Carbohydrate and sugars

"Carbohydrate" includes starches and sugars. "Of which sugars" includes naturally occurring and added sugars together. The ingredients list provides context about sources.

### Fat and saturates

Fat supplies energy, supports cell function and helps absorb vitamins. Saturates are shown separately. One food need not meet every population recommendation by itself.

### Protein

Protein supports growth and repair. The number can help when a clinician or dietitian has recommended attention to intake, but higher is not automatically better for everyone.

## Salt and sodium

UK labels normally state salt. Some imported information may state sodium. People with specific medical conditions should follow individual professional advice.

## Traffic-light colours

Front-of-pack red, amber and green colours are designed as quick comparison tools for selected nutrients. Red does not mean forbidden and green does not mean unlimited. Frequency, portion, the rest of the pattern, medical needs and whether the food is accessible all matter.

## Claims on the front

Terms such as “source of fibre”, “high protein” or “reduced sugar” are regulated claims with defined criteria. They describe one feature, not the whole product. Words such as natural, clean, guilt-free or superfood may be marketing rather than useful health information.

## Serving sizes and portions

A label portion is a calculation reference, not an instruction about how much you should eat. Appetite and needs change. Children, athletes, people recovering from illness and those with limited appetite may need different amounts.

## Vitamins, minerals and reference intakes

Percentages compare a stated amount with an adult reference intake. They are not personalised targets and are not designed to be added obsessively across the day. A registered dietitian can interpret values for an individual condition or restricted diet.

## Labels and food anxiety

Repeated checking can become a reassurance cycle. Decide which fact is necessary, check once when safe to do so, and move on. Allergy safety is essential; checking driven by fear of calories, purity or perfection may need eating-disorder-informed support.

### A short reading routine

- Purpose: what exact question am I answering?
- Safety: allergens, use-by date and storage.
- Choice: ingredients or nutrition information relevant to my need.
- Context: per 100, per portion and what else I will eat.
- Stop: I have enough information for this decision.

## When labels are hard to process

Use a phone magnifier, good lighting, a product website, a saved safe-food list or help from a trusted person. Dyslexia, visual stress and processing differences are accessibility needs. Ask manufacturers directly if essential information remains unclear.

## Questions for reflection

- Which label information genuinely protects my safety?
- Which information supports a meaningful choice?
- Which words trigger guilt or perfectionism?
- Am I comparing equivalent amounts?
- Would professional advice reduce uncertainty?
- Can I stop once my question is answered?

## A message from Maggie

*You do not need to turn every packet into an exam. Read what protects your safety and helps you choose, then let the rest remain information rather than judgment. A red traffic light is not a ban, a number is not a verdict, and a marketing word does not know your body. If labels are making food smaller, scarier or more rule-bound, you deserve support.*

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## Further information and sources

Food Standards Agency - Food allergy, allergen labelling, date labels and food information: [food.gov.uk](https://www.food.gov.uk)

NHS - Food labels and healthy eating: [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

British Dietetic Association - Food facts and Find a Dietitian: [bda.uk.com](https://www.bda.uk.com)

Allergy UK - Food allergy and label-reading information: [allergyuk.org](https://www.allergyuk.org)

UK guidance can change. Check current official information. General education only; this guide does not replace individual medical or dietetic advice.