

Food labels are very useful for helping us make healthy choices when grocery shopping. But have you ever had the slightly frustrating experience of trying to interpret a food label and compare products? Maybe the fine print was so tiny you needed a magnifier to decipher it, or the nutrition information panel was on the confusing side. And how do you know if those health claims on the package are actually telling the truth?

Research shows Australian shoppers regularly look at food labels for a number of different reasons. It may be to avoid foods or additives that cause allergies or intolerances or to steer clear of high-fat foods or genetically modified foods. Whatever the reason may be, it is important to know what to look for and how to interpret this information.

Here are NAQ Nutrition's simplified top tips on reading food labels.

Ingredients list

Look for the ingredients list. You might find it on the top, bottom, or side of the pack and all products will display it differently. Ingredients are listed in order of quantity from the highest to the lowest. If a product is called 'flaked honey corn cereal' must have to list the percentage of corn and honey that is in the product in the ingredients list as well.

In the list, look for sources of **fat**, **sugar** and **salt**. If these are listed towards the start of the ingredients list, it is highly likely that the product is not a healthy choice. Also, there can be many names for high fat, salt and/or sugar ingredients

Ingredients high in:

Fat - butter, butterfat, margarine, animal fat, shortening, coconut oil, copha, cream, lard, ghee, dripping, palm oil, mayonnaise, sour cream, vegetable oil, hydrogenated oil, coconut oil and cream, full cream milk solids

Sugar - sucrose, fructose, dextrose, maltose, glucose, lactose, molasses, honey, rice malt syrup, malt extract, raw sugar, brown sugar, modified carbohydrate, coconut sugar

Salt - sodium, rock salt, onion salt, celery or garlic salt, vegetable salt, MSG, yeast extracts, booster, stock, baking soda, sodium bicarbonate

Nutrition claims

Natural claims are often seen on packaging but there are no enforceable food standards regulating the use of the term. This means that products claiming to be natural can still have artificial

ingredients. Look for foods that are closest to nature and don't need ingredients label like fresh fruit and vegetables, wholegrain like rice and oats and lean meats, fish and poultry. Michael Pollan points out that *'any food product that feels compelled to tell you it's natural in all likelihood is not'*.

Superfood is a marketing term rather than a scientific one that often attracts a higher price as well. It can carry a lot of weight for consumers that a 'superfood' is a rich source of many nutrients. No one food can provide all our nutrition needs. Most fruits and vegetables are high in nutrients and could all be considered superfoods in one way or another.

Wholegrain foods are an important part of a healthy diet. However, the term is increasingly being used to promote products that also contain other unhealthy ingredients like chips and sugary cereals. True wholegrain sources are foods like oats, rice, barely, whole wheat and quinoa.

Baked Not Fried sounds healthier, but it may still have just as much fat so it's important to check the nutrition information panel. Often found on savoury biscuits, frozen chips and crumbed foods.

No Added Sugar means that the product has not had sugars added to it, but it may still be high in naturally occurring sugars from fruit or milk. Often seen on fruit juice and yoghurt.

Low Fat: this food must have 3g of fat or less per 100g. But look at the label because it may be high in sugar instead. Often found in dairy products and sweet and savoury biscuits.

Lite or Light: always check the nutrition information label on these foods because lite may mean the food is light in colour or taste, or something else and not low in salt, fat or sugar.

Low Joule or Diet: this food is either low in sugar and/or fat and is may be artificially sweetened. Often found on yoghurt, jelly or desserts.

No Added Salt: this food has no 'added' salt but may still be high in naturally occurring salt so check the label for the salt content. Often found on tinned foods and sauces and is a better. choice.

Salt Reduced: this food has 25% less salt than a similar product. Lower salt is good, but the food may still be high in salt so check the label. Often seen on tinned soups and legumes and cheese.

Low Salt or Low Sodium: this food must have less than 120mg sodium per 100g and is a good choice.

Source of Fibre: a product that claims to be 'a source of fibre' must have at least 2g of fibre per serve. A better choice would be 3g or more of fibre per serve with 7 g being an 'excellent source' choice. Look for fibre on the nutrition panel especially for cereals, bread, muesli bars and crackers.

Nutrition information panel

The nutrition information panel is the numbers end of the reading food labels. At a minimum, there will be number values for

- energy or kilojoules/calories,
- protein,
- total fat and saturated fat,
- carbohydrate and sugars,
- sodium (salt)
- Some products may also list fibre content and specific vitamin and nutrients like vitamin c or iron.

A product will list information per serve and per 100g of the item. It's important to note that when comparing 2 products it's best to use the per 100g column as the serving sizes may be different.