

Choosing healthy foods: how to read food label nutrition panels

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Knowing how to interpret the nutrition panel on food labels enables you to make healthier food choices.

When reading the nutrition information on a food label you should:

- check the nutrition information panel for the amounts of total, saturated and trans fats, sugars, sodium and fibre – see the guides below.
- compare products 'per 100 g'.

The ingredients list is in order of decreasing quantity and therefore provides additional information about the amounts of fats and sugars in a food. Look for foods where sources of fats and sugars are lower on the list of ingredients, and be aware of hidden fats (particularly saturated fats), added sugars and hidden sodium (mainly as salt). Hidden fats include shortening, lard, tallow, coconut oil and palm oil. Added sugars include glucose, sucrose, syrups, molasses and modified carbohydrate. Hidden sodium includes monosodium glutamate (MSG), meat and vegetable extracts, baking powder, sodium bicarbonate and stock cubes.

Label reading guides

The guides over the page can be used to help select healthy foods when shopping. Cut them out and keep them at home and in your wallet for easy reference.

As with all guides, there are some exceptions – for example, some low fat yoghurts (less than 3% total fat) that are not fruit-based may be excluded using the guideline shown for sugars, yet they may still be considered a healthy choice. Also, fats and oils are all high in total fat and will not meet these guidelines: look for monounsaturated and polyunsaturated sources, and aim for less than 1% trans fat for margarines.

Choosing healthy foods in the supermarket that meet these guidelines can be both time consuming and difficult. Exercise your own discretion when making food choices, and choose foods that best meet the guidelines.

Further information

The guidelines included here are those used by the Diabetes Centre at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Adelaide, SA.

Further information on reading food labels and nutrition for patients with diabetes is available on the Diabetes Centre website, www.diabetes.org.au.

This handout outlines how to read and interpret the nutrition panel on food labels.



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For the home

Healthy foods: reading nutrition panels Remember to look at the 'per 100 g' column, not the 'per serve' column	
Nutrient	Per 100 g
Fat – Total	Aim for less than 10 g per 100 g For milk and yoghurt, aim for less than 2 g per 100 g Oils and margarines are all high in total fat (more than 10 g per 100 g); choose polyunsaturated and monounsaturated varieties
– Saturated	Aim for as low as possible
– Trans	Aim for as low as possible For margarines, aim for less than 1 g per 100 g
Carbohydrate – Sugars	Aim for less than 10 g per 100 g For foods containing fruit, aim for less than 25 g per 100 g
Dietary fibre	For breads and cereals, aim for more than 5 g per 100 g (the recommended daily intake is 30 g per 100 g)
Sodium	Aim for less than 400 mg per 100 g, and if possible less than 120 mg Look for 'No added salt', 'Salt reduced' and 'Low Salt' labels

For your wallet or purse

Healthy foods: read the label!	
Nutrient	Per 100 g
Total fat	Aim for less than 10 g For dairy foods, aim for less than 2 g Exception: oils and margarines are all high in total fat – choose polyunsaturated and monounsaturated varieties
Sugars	Aim for less than 10 g For foods containing fruit, aim for less than 25 g
Sodium	Aim for less than 400 mg
Fibre	For breads and cereals, aim for more than 5 g



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