

# Lifting the lid on FOOD LABELS



BAMBOOZLED BY FOOD LABELS? DIETITIAN **VANESSA JONES** SORTS THROUGH THE CONFUSION SO YOU CAN SHOP SMARTER

Reading food labels can sometimes seem like reading a road map in a foreign language! Let's face it, the nutritional information on food products is not always easy to read and interpret. But the good news is that food labelling in Australia is about to change. New food labelling laws will soon come into effect, which will make it easier for you to make informed and healthy choices when you're doing the grocery shopping.

## WHAT ARE THE CHANGES?

At the moment, it is not compulsory for food manufacturers to provide nutrition information on their products unless they make a nutrition claim (such as 'Low fat' or 'High fibre'). So not all food in the supermarket currently provides all the nutritional information we need. This makes it difficult when you are trying to work out which foods are healthy and which foods are laden with fat or high in energy. As of December this year, it will

be mandatory for all food manufacturers to spell out exactly what their products contain. The information must be clearly presented on the packaging in a nutrition information panel (NIP). There will be a few exceptions to this rule, such as foods sold in very small packages and foods like herbs and spices, coffee, tea and foods that are sold unpackaged like fruits, vegetables, meat and fish. Currently, the NIP provides information on energy, protein, total fat, carbohydrate, sodium

and potassium. This information will change slightly as a result of the new food labelling laws.

The most significant and positive change to take place will be the compulsory labelling of 'saturated fat'. Saturated fat is an undesirable fat as it raises cholesterol levels in the blood and increases your risk of developing heart disease. Very soon, you will be able to clearly see how much of the fat in a food product contains 'saturated fat'. And you may be in for a few nasty surprises. Many products that are commonly perceived to be healthy will be forced to show their true colours and reveal how unhealthy they really are for the heart.

The labelling changes are good news for people with food allergies and intolerances. From December, the main ingredients that commonly cause grief to allergy sufferers – such as peanuts, other nuts, fish, seafood, milk, gluten, eggs and soybeans – must be declared on the label, no matter how small the amount. This declaration will be made in the ingredients list to give allergy sufferers greater confidence when shopping and

allow them to add greater variety to their diet by selecting foods that are free from allergens. These changes will give everyone more power to select authentic healthy food.

## HOW DO I READ THE NUTRITION INFORMATION PANEL (NIP)?

If you find all the numbers in the NIP a little daunting, then worry no more. This user-friendly guide will help you unravel the mystery and show you what to look for (refer to the food label on the opposite page).

## ENERGY

This is the amount of kilojoules or calories in the food. If you are managing your weight, it is useful to get into the habit of checking and comparing the energy content of foods. Next time you go shopping, compare the energy content of the products you normally buy with similar products. It is important to use the 'per 100g' column when comparing products and not the 'per serve' column, as serving sizes vary from product to product.



## FAT – TOTAL

This is the total amount of fat in the product. It includes the three main types of fat – saturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated. Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are heart-friendly and saturated fats are 'heart foes'. A small amount of the 'heart friendly' fats coming from foods like olive oil, nuts and avocado is important in the diet, but you should avoid eating excessive amounts if weight control is an issue. If you are watching your weight, it is useful to keep an eye out for products with less than 10g of total fat per 100g.

## FAT – SATURATED

This shows you how much saturated fat is included in the product. As saturated fat increases the risk of heart disease, it is important to choose foods low in saturated fat. The rule here is simple – the closer the saturated fat content is to zero, the better.

## CARBOHYDRATE – TOTAL

This tells you the total amount of carbohydrate that comes from starches, naturally occurring sugars and added sugars. It is not necessary to look at the total carbohydrate content unless you suffer from diabetes and have been instructed by your dietitian or GP to calculate the grams eaten.

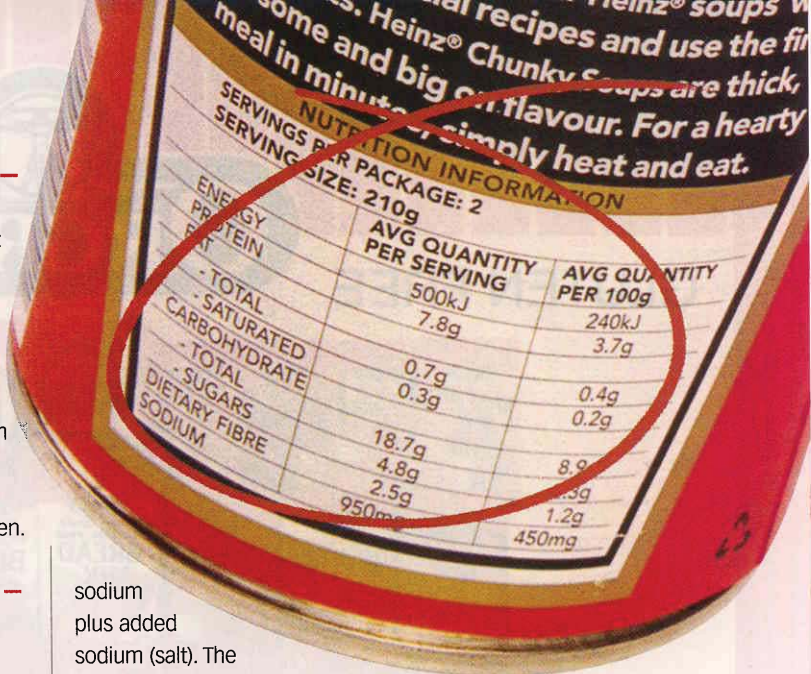
## CARBOHYDRATE – SUGARS

Many shoppers incorrectly believe this just means 'added sugar'. In fact, it includes 'added sugar' plus sugars found naturally in foods, such as the fructose in fruit and the lactose in milk. If you want to know if a product is high in 'added sugar' it is best to look at the ingredients list. If sugar appears in the first three ingredients listed, the 'added sugar' content is likely to be high.

## SODIUM (SALT)

This includes naturally occurring

sodium plus added sodium (salt). The maximum daily sodium allowance for an average adult is 2300mg per day. This is handy to know when you are comparing the sodium content of various food products, as many processed foods like pre-prepared frozen meals and take-aways are very high in salt. It is not uncommon for some products to provide more than half the daily sodium quota in one serving. Too much sodium in the diet is a risk factor for high blood pressure.



## DIETARY FIBRE

Dietary fibre is not a compulsory feature of the NIP. It is often included in the panel when a fibre claim is made, such as 'high in fibre'. You should aim for around 30g of fibre each day, so compare different food products and choose those that contain the highest amount. Fibre is an essential part of any weight loss regime so this feature is well worth checking out.

## INGREDIENTS

Ingredients are listed on food labels in order from the greatest to the smallest amount used, based on the weight of the ingredient. It is always useful to look at the first three ingredients listed, because these comprise the bulk of the product.

## HOW DO I MAKE SENSE OF ALL THE NUTRITION CLAIMS?

Ever wondered what the difference is between 'low fat' and 'lite'? The difference is actually enormous. Let's take a look at what the various nutrition claims really mean.

- **LIGHT OR LITE:** The meaning of this claim is double-barrelled. It can mean the product contains less fat or salt. It can also be used to indicate that the product is light in flavour, as in the case of 'Lite Olive Oil'. Therefore, it is unwise to rely on this claim alone as a means of selecting healthier products.
- **LOW-FAT:** This means the product must not contain any more than 3g fat per 100g (3% fat) if it is a solid product. If it is a liquid product, such as milk, it must not contain any more than 1.5g fat per 100g (1.5% fat). This can be a useful claim to look for, but there is a catch. Some foods that are low in fat actually contain the same amount of energy (kilojoules) as the full fat variety. This is because extra sugar is sometimes added to low fat products to make them taste better. Low-fat yoghurt is a common culprit. Always compare the 'energy' content of different 'low-fat' products and select those that are lowest in energy.
- **REDUCED FAT:** These products contain 25% less fat than the regular food product. Beware of this claim, as it does not necessarily mean the food is low in fat such as reduced fat cheese and chocolate.
- **CHOLESTEROL-FREE:** This simply means the product contains insignificant amounts of dietary cholesterol. It does not necessarily mean the food is low in total fat or saturated fat. In fact, some 'cholesterol free' products like potato crisps cooked in vegetable oil are still very high in total fat – as high as 30% in some foods. This is not at all good for the waistline, so be very careful!
- **HIGH FIBRE:** 'High Fibre' products must contain a minimum of 3g fibre per serve. It is a very useful guide, so keep your eyes peeled for products that display this claim.
- **REDUCED SALT:** This means the food item has 25% less sodium (salt) than the regular product. Just like the 'reduced fat' claim, it is important to keep in mind that many 'reduced salt' products are still very high in salt. 'Reduced salt' soy sauce is a classic example of this.

## SUPERMARKET SLEUTH TIPS

- To help you visualise the amount of fat in food, remember 5g fat = 1 tsp of fat.
- Practical application: You pick up a frozen dinner and the NIP states it contains 35g fat per serve. This is equivalent to eating seven teaspoons of fat. Picture yourself eating 7 teaspoons of margarine, because if you happen to buy this frozen dinner, that's how much fat you will be eating!