



Food labels and healthy food choices

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Key points

- Most of the food items are now available in pre-packaged form. Therefore, the consumer needs to know what is inside the pack.
- Food labels on a package provide information about contents, ingredients and nutritional information as well as shelf life.
- Reading the label can help to make an assessment of the nutritional quality and safety of the foods and make an informed choice.
- Nutrition and health claims are regulated by FSSAI.
- Always read food label information to know about content of foods inside a pack.
- Food label should display the name of the food, brand name, list of the ingredients, date of manufacture, use-by/expiration dates, allergen declaration, etc.
- The ingredients are presented in a descending order, with the food item that has been used in highest quantity stated as the first item.
- The nutrient content declaration is usually printed on the back of the pack. This nutrient content provides nutrients per 100gm/100ml or serve size to help the consumer make informed choices.
- Now percent RDA per nutrient for every serving of food is also mandatory on the label.
- Although nutrition and health claims are regulated by FSSAI, consumers are advised to exercise caution by cross-checking the claims with ingredients and nutrition information on the label.

What does the label information inform us about the food?

Food labels display the name of the food, a list of the ingredients, the net weight, brand name, name and address of the manufacturer, date of manufacture, use-by/expiry dates, storage instructions, allergen declaration and shelf-life



of the food. In case of imported foods, the country of origin and complete address of the importer and packing premises are provided.



The ingredient declaration informs of all the ingredients that are in the food product. These are displayed in descending order with the ingredient that is highest in quantity appearing first.

A declaration of nutrient information is mandatory as per the Indian regulation especially: Energy (in Kcal); protein (in grams); carbohydrates (specifying quantity of sugar) and fat (in grams), clearly specifying the quantity of saturated fats and trans fats. The nutrition facts should also display the amount of any other nutrient the product claims to contain. Always read nutrition facts and ingredients presented on the label and assess the benefits of the specific food items in relation to nutritional requirements.

What do various terms and symbols used on labels convey?

- Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) logo with license number indicates that the manufacturer is licensed by the regulator.
- A green dot in a green square indicates vegetarian food and a brown triangle in a brown square indicates non-vegetarian [at least one ingredient is from animal source (including egg but not milk)].
- Logo for fortified food: 'Fortified' food means essential nutrients such as vitamins and minerals have been added to the food. Consuming fortified wheat flour, rice, milk, oil, and salt helps to meet the deficit in daily requirement for specific nutrients.
- Vegan logo: In view of the growing popularity of veganism, FSSAI has introduced vegan logo to be displayed on the pack for foods that do not have ingredients, food additives, and processing aids of animal origin (incl. milk, honey etc.). This will help differentiate vegan products from vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods.
- 'ISI' mark is currently mandatory on the labels of packaged drinking and mineral water and certain processed foods such as infant food, milk and skimmed milk powder. However, this may be done away with soon as all quality symbols on food packs will now be provided by FSSAI alone.
- 'AGMARK' on agricultural products such as vegetable oil, pulses, cereals, spices, honey, fruits and vegetables indicates quality of the products.

What information is required to assess the safety and shelf life of a food item?

Always check the 'Date of Manufacture' and 'Use-by' or 'Date of Expiry' for freshness. 'Expiry date' or 'Use-by date' indicates that the product's quality and safety could deteriorate and consumption beyond that date would increase the risk of food poisoning. Be sure to consume foods before the 'Use-by' or 'Expiry' date. Also read the 'Storage Instructions' to know where and how to keep the food product and for how long. Read instructions for use if stated. Make sure you follow these instructions for best results.

Some individuals may be allergic to some specific food items. Avoid food products that include such

ingredients. Consuming these even in small quantities can cause severe allergic reactions in some people. Common allergy-causing ingredients include casein in milk, tree nuts, peanuts, eggs, fish, shellfish, soyabean, and proteins in wheat. Those who are concerned can see the Allergen Declaration.

How is the display of nutrition facts useful?

In the label, under the words 'Nutrition Facts', there is a statement on the 'Serving Size'. This is one of the most important pieces of information on the label because all of the nutrition information shown is based on the referred serving size. The serving size could be described in a few different ways in the label and depends on the food item being referred to. The most common measures are grams, cups, scoops and pieces. Grams tend to be listed most of the time even when the serving size may also be listed in a different way.

Check the net weight of the packet. This is the total amount of product contained in the packet. The Nutrition Facts Label information is generally based on one serving per 100g/100ml, but many packages may contain more than one serving or more than 100g or 100ml. Check how many servings per ml/g is being used against the number of serving unit used for presenting the Nutrition Facts. According to the amount of food item being used, assess calories and other nutrients in the portion being used.

What are claims?

Manufacturers also use labels to make incorrect and incomplete claims about their food products. These claims presented on the package can be broadly categorized as follows:

- **Nutrition claim:** There is a general misconception that 'Nutrition Facts' and 'Nutrient/Nutrition claims' are the same. Nutrition claim refers to any statement, which suggests or implies that a food has particular nutritional properties. Claims like 'low calorie', 'high fibre', 'low fat', 'low sodium' is not complete information. These have to be substantiated by providing the actual values or nutritional facts about the product.
- **Health claims:** Any representation that states, suggests, or implies that a relationship exists between a food product (or a constituent of the food) and health, is a health claim. These include nutrition claims, which describe the physiological role of the nutrient in growth, development and function of the body, and other functional claims concerning specific beneficial effects gained upon consumption of the food.
- **Risk reduction claims:** These are claims relating to the consumption of a food product or food constituent in reducing the risk of developing a specific disease or a health condition. Any such claim made by food companies is supposed to be substantiated with scientific evaluation independently before they are used.
- **Other claims:** Claims like 'this food is source of...' or 'has high content of...' referring to particular nutrient(s) are also subject to certain guidelines, which specify that the numerical specific information pertaining to vitamins and minerals be expressed in metric units and/or as a percentage of the Nutrient Reference Values or per 100g or per 100ml or per serving.

Can label claims be misleading?

Health claims on packaged food are designed to catch the consumer attention and convince them that

product is healthy. Though the Food Safety and Standard Authority of India (FSSAI) has strict norms, the information presented in labels could be misleading. Following are some of the examples.

- **'All natural':** A food product can be called 'natural' if it doesn't have added colors, added flavors or artificial substances and goes through minimal processing. This term is often used rather loosely. It is often used by manufacturers to identify one or two natural ingredients in the mix and this can be misleading. Read the label, specifically the ingredients and other information carefully to cross-check the claims. Presented below are some examples of statements on labels that could be misleading.
- **'Real fruit or fruit juice':** According to the FSSAI regulation, any food item with even a small amount, for example, fruit juices containing only 10 or less percent of fruit added to a product is allowed to state that the product is made with real fruit pulp or juice. But the product claiming to have real fruit may have added sugar and other additives with only 10 % actual fruit pulp.
- **'Made with whole grain':** These words could be misinterpreted. Such a statement does not necessarily imply that the food items are not tertiary or ultra-processed.
- **'Organic':** When a food label states 'organic', it may simply mean that it is free of all artificial preservatives, flavors and colours and that the food ingredients are free from pesticides and chemical fertilizers. If both the above are met, then the label can state 100% organic and have the 'Jaivik Bharat' logo approved by FSSAI.
- **'Low fat or Light':** Many low fat or non-fat foods may still have a lot of calories. Often these foods have extra sugar, refined flour or starch thickeners to make them taste better. Many of these ingredients are often used as fat replacers. These ingredients add calories from the added carbohydrates. For low fat, look for information on whether the food item has 0 grams (g) of fat and whether it is low in saturated fat and cholesterol. Foods that contain 'partially hydrogenated oils' in the ingredients list should not be acceptable. Light/lite versions are also often claimed on products. It may imply that the fat/oil used is more easily absorbed than others. However, it does not mean that it is low in calories since 1 gm of ANY fat/oil will give 9 calories.
- **'No cholesterol or Heart friendly':** No plant-based oil contains cholesterol. However, all oils are 100% fat and therefore should be consumed in moderate quantities.
- **'Good source of vitamin D, proteins or other nutrients':** A good source means that a single serving of that food has 10% to 19% of the amount of that nutrient. While this information is useful, read about the quantity of these nutrients with reference to daily nutrient recommended.
- **'Sugar free':** People often associate sugar-free foods with lower calories and perceive these to be beneficial for diabetics and weight watchers. Sugar-free foods may be loaded with fats, refined cereals (white flour, starch) and even hidden sugars (maltitol, fructose, corn syrup, molasses). These would imply high glycaemic index and high calories in the food item.

Mandatory nutrient information to be provided on the label

Nutrient information on the label	Importance of choosing the food
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Note calories per serving, presented in 'Kcal', which stands for kilocalories.• Check number of servings. If the label states two servings for

Energy	<p>the entire packet and the calorie content is 100 calories per serving, then use of the entire packet would imply consumption of 200 calories.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Fat-free' does not mean 'calorie-free'.
Carbohydrates and sugar	Check for 'energy' coming from carbohydrates and sugars. Pay attention to sugars, especially added sugars, to reduce risk of obesity and NCDs. Select foods that are low in refined carbohydrates.
Fats	Select the food or variant of the foods, that are low in refined carbohydrates and total fat content, especially saturated fats, and those that contain no trans fats. This would help in reducing risk of heart disease.
Sodium	Select foods that are low in sodium content to help reduce the risk of high blood pressure.
Dietary fibre, vitamins and minerals	Check if the vitamins, minerals and fibre in the product are natural or added. It is mandatory to display them under 'Nutrition Facts' in the label. Naturally present vitamins, minerals and fibre have health benefits, but added ones may be chemicals and may not have much value.
Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs)	Food labels display nutrient contents as a proportion of the RDAs. i.e. percentage of the nutrients in relation to a 2000 Kcal/day recommendation.

Source : **ICMR-NIN Dietary guidelines for Indians** 

Source: <https://data.vikaspedia.in/short/lc?k=KCijidXUml5LUiBtaK5ddA>

