

Food Labels

Demystified

*How to navigate the grocery store to make
healthier food choices*



Food Labels Demystified

What is in the food you're buying?

There is a general awareness of the link between chronic disease and the consumption of an ultra-processed Western diet. Many of us aspire to opt for healthier food choices but become overwhelmed and confused by the vast amount of (often conflicting) information, misleading marketing claims and meaningless buzzwords.

- Does it actually matter if your fruit and vegetables are organic?
- Should your oils be cold-pressed or high-heat safe?
- When should you prioritise quality over affordability (and vice versa)?
- What are superfoods?

This guide aims to help you navigate the current food environment and increase awareness of the quality of food that ends up on your plate.

To get started – general tips

- **Shop the perimeter.** You will find the freshest whole foods around the outside of the store (produce, meats, dairy).
- **Keep it simple.** Remember, convenience is costly. Extra packaging means increased cost in terms of money & impact on the planet. Buying processed foods can lead to eating more than the recommended amounts of sugar, salt and fat without being aware.
- **Be attentive to marketing claims.** Products are covered with symbols, buzzwords, and health claims. Sometimes they are helpful, but they can often be misleading. For example, Oreos are 'plant based' and 'low fat' frozen yoghurt ice cream often has more sugar than regular ice cream. That doesn't make either of them healthy.
- **Check ingredients.** If there are 6 or more, or if you cannot pronounce them, it is best to avoid them.
- **Think beyond your high-street supermarket.** Farmers' markets, green grocers, butchers, box schemes etc. sell ingredients, not meals. Or order some of the healthier substitutes on-line.

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How to read a Food label

Food manufacturers have become very savvy in making health claims for the food they are selling, such as 'helps maintain a healthy heart' or 'helps aid digestion'. Since 2007, specific rules have been put in place to help prevent misleading claims but marketeers have found creative ways to work within the guidelines that are easily misinterpreted.

The answer?

Learn to read and interpret food labels!

Nutrition information is usually found on the back of the pack like the below:



Typical values	per 100g	per 205g serving
Energy (KJ)	414	848
Energy (kcal)	98	201
Protein (g)	4.8	9.8
Carbohydrate (g)	16.1	33
of which sugars (g)	5.9	12.1
Fat (g)	0.4	0.8
of which saturates (g)	0.1	0.2
Fibre (g)	5.5	11.3
Sodium (g)	0.3	0.6
Salt equivalent (g)	0.8	1.5

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Serving size indicates portion size recommended by the manufacturer like one biscuit or 30g of breakfast cereal. The reality is that few people will only consume one biscuit and a typical portion size of cereal is generally 40 – 50g.

Kcal is kilocalories - the unit that a foods' energy is measured in, often abbreviated to '*calories*'. **Calories say nothing of the overall health** of the product. Instead focus on the ingredients list.

Fat content is not about quantity, but quality:

- ✘ stay way from transfats and processed seed oils
- 👍 low-fat foods contain 3g fat or less per 100g
- 👎 high-fat foods contain 20g or more per 100g
- 👍 low saturates contain 1.5g or less per 100g
- 👎 high saturates contain 5g or more per 100g



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Carbohydrate tolerance is very bio-individual.

Added sugar is one of the most important things to look at (and to avoid). Sugar comes in many different names, anything ending with '-ose' such as fructose, dextrose, glucose, sucrose, maltose is a sugar. So are golden syrup, honey, maple syrup, brown sugar, molasses etc.



Extra **nutrient content** is great, but most micronutrients should come from whole foods that have no labels.

Read the ingredients list first (if you don't recognise something, your body won't either and is likely to store it in fat cells for safe keeping).

- Less than 5 - 6 ingredients is ideal
- Listed by descending weight
- Manufacturers will use 2+ forms of sugar so they appear lower on the list
- Be cautious of vague ingredients like 'natural flavours' or spices
- Gluten is not listed as a top allergen

Reduced – this means the calorific or nutrient content has been reduced by 25% of the original product. Does this mean it's healthy? Not necessarily.

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Low Calorie explained

Many dieting messages promote calorie reduction (calories in < calories out). Thermodynamically, a calorie deficit is necessary for a body to dip into its fat stores and lose weight. However, this is not the whole story...

One issue with **this reductionist approach is that it fails to consider the complexities of metabolism.** Different types of calories (carbohydrates, fats and protein) are broken down and utilised differently. Food is information, so if your body senses scarcity, it will shift into starvation mode and begin conserving and storing more fat.



Another issue with this approach is that the **calorie count of a food does not reflect its nutritional value.**

Sure, nuts are high in calories and diet coke is low, but there is an extreme difference on how nourishing these foods are!



Finally, this **hyper-focus on calories can lead to disordered eating.** You are much better to forget about calories, listen to your body, and choose foods in their natural form.

Low Fat explained

The topic of dietary fats and oils is another controversial and puzzling topic in the field of nutrition. A few decades ago, the assumption was that all fats (including cooking oil and butter) were bad for health. And because dietary fat has the same name as body fat, people assume that eating fats, makes them fat. Reducing dietary fat should therefore lead to weight loss. However, 'low fat' is a common but deceptive marketing term.

Like with the low-calorie diet message, this reductionist approach fails to consider the complexities of metabolism. Different types of calories (carbohydrates, fats and protein) are broken down and utilised differently. In fact, eating more fat promotes your body's ability to burn it (versus being stuck in a sugar-burning mode, which often leads to unhealthy weight gain)!

Fat is necessary for many things in the body: nutrient absorption, inflammation management, hormone production, consistent energy, cell membrane structure and signalling... A diet without sufficient healthy fats will lead to fatty acid deficiency. In addition, low-fat products often have more added sugar to compensate for the missing fat. So be wary of low-fat marketing claims and choose to eat healthy, whole-foods fats.

Remember, moderate consumption of quality fats (not chemically derived refined oils or trans-fats) is as likely to make you fat, as eating blueberries will turn you blue.

Low Sodium explained

'Low-sodium' is another marketing term that has unduly vilified salt in the minds of consumers. It originated from the idea that decreased sodium lowers blood pressure, translating into improved cardiovascular health. However, this hypothesis is oversimplified, the truth is more nuanced.

Sodium (the main mineral in salt) is one of the most important electrolytes in the body. It is necessary for cell signalling, muscle contractions, water balance, nutrient absorption, and many other functions. It is true that lower sodium consumption lowers blood pressure, but this is because it changes the fluid balance in the body. It does not address the reason that the body is raising blood pressure in the first place!

One of the problems with ultra-processed convenience food is that they often contain high amounts of sugar and salt and the sugar will counteract the taste of the salt. This means you will ingest higher levels of salt than you realise.

When sticking with whole foods, there is no need to restrict the salt you add to your food, let your cravings guide you (your body is telling you how much sodium it needs!).



Sugar free explained

'**Sugar-free**' is a marketing term that may or may not be informative. In general, it is a good idea to limited processed and added sugar. However, the question you must ask yourself when you see this claim is ...

WHY?

There are two reasons a product may be labelled as 'sugar-free'.

1. The item may be **naturally low in sugar** (like unsweetened tea).
2. Or it may be sweetened with an **alternative sweetener** (sugar-free tea that still tastes sweet).

Alternative sweeteners are not an innocent substitute for sugar

Many think they are harmless because they don't contain calories. However, your body still senses and responds hormonally as if it were real sugar (causing undesired blood sugar swings, cravings, and unhealthy weight gain).



The compounds in artificial sweeteners (like aspartame, sucralose, anything ending in '-itol' and even stevia) can disrupt your gut, brain and hormones. Your best bet is to choose foods that are naturally low in sugar or contain sugar from nature, like honey, maple syrup or fruit.

Plant Based explained

'**Plant-based**' is another popular marketing terms to describe foods that are sourced from plants.

However, it is important to differentiate between an exclusive plant-based diet and an inclusive one. An exclusive plant-based diet is completely vegan. In contrast, an inclusive plant-based diet could contain meat and animal products, but plants make up the majority of the plate.

Currently, the fastest growing food companies are those that are creating vegan replacements for traditional animal-based products that come as close as possible to the taste and texture of what consumers are used to.

The term however says nothing about quality. Oreos and Percy Pigs are vegan, but that doesn't mean they are healthy! Processed food isn't healthy, vegan or not.



But a plant-based diet that is loaded with colourful fruits and vegetables is going to be incredibly nourishing!

Takeaway:

be wary of flashy marketing & whenever possible choose food that doesn't have a label!

Superfoods explained

Superfood is a marketing term for food assumed to confer health benefits resulting from an exceptional nutrient density. In the world of health and nutrition, many dispute that specific foods have the health benefits claimed. In 2007, the term 'superfood' was prohibited in the European Union unless supported by credible scientific evidence.

Nevertheless, consumers continue to be drawn to the **'superfoods'** through recommendations and their own research. However, a local seasonal berry can be every bit as 'super' as a 'superfood' berry from the Amazon, with far less air miles.



Superfoods are no panacea but it comes down to individual choice. The healthy eating market is huge, and many people want to try out new flavours and new ingredients, which superfoods



can offer.

Popular examples include: spirulina, moringa, baobab, acai, wheatgrass, barley grass, Siberian ginseng, guarana, maca and goji berries.

Organic foods

Is organic better than ordinary food? This is the two billion pound question! Here are some considerations:

Organic refers to food items that are grown, farmed, processed and packaged without using chemicals such as pesticides, fungicides and fertiliser, hormones, antibiotics or genetically-modified organism.



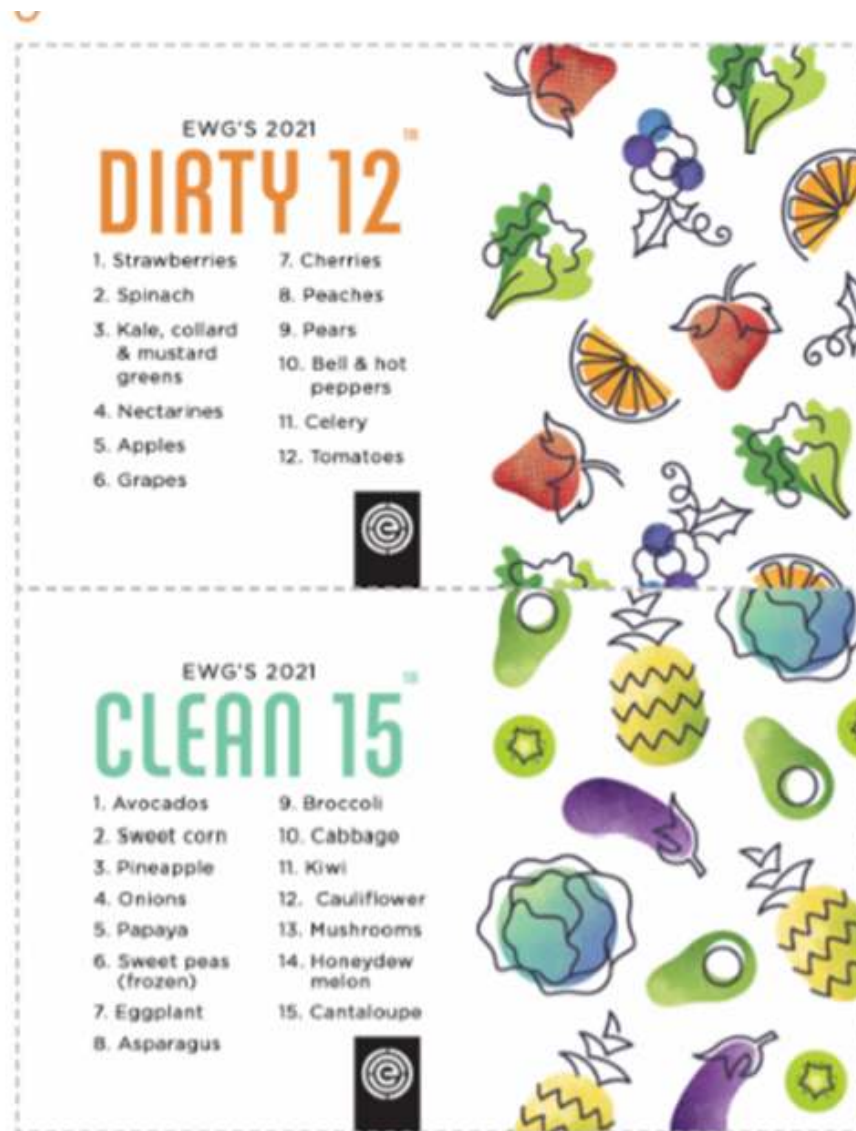
- Organic food does not usually contain 'hidden' fats, salt and sugar and other avoidable additives, commonly found in processed and mass-produced foods. Food certified as organic is also not allowed to contain any genetically modified ingredients.
- It is widely thought to be both environmentally and ethically better, with an emphasis on renewable resources and conservation.
- Organic food is believed to contain higher concentrations of essential vitamins and minerals, although this has never been proven.
- It tastes better (this is, of course, a matter of opinion as many people notice absolutely no difference in taste tests).
- Some people buy only organic meat because the animals are treated more humanely.

Look for statement on food packaging so you can identify if food is truly organically grown:

- **100% organic** means a product is made entirely from organic ingredients
- **Organic means** at least 95% of the ingredients in this product are organic
- **Made with organic** means at least 70% of the ingredients are organic

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EWG (Environmental Working Group) is an American activist group that specialises in research and advocacy in the areas of agricultural subsidies, toxic chemicals, drinking water pollutants, and corporate accountability. Each year they publish a list of the 'Dirty Dozen' and 'Clean 15' to guide consumers on what produce to buy organic from a health perspective. Although we do not have an equivalent in the UK, you may find the below summary informative.



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Animal Protein

HEALTHY ANIMALS = HEALTHY PRODUCTS

MEAT

- 100% grass-fed
- Pasture finished
- no antibiotics
- No hormones
- Non GMO fed
- Organic

'Grass-fed' alone means that the cows may still have eaten grain.



POULTRY AND EGGS



Be careful, 'all natural' is not a regulated term

- Free range
- Soy free
- No anti-biotics
- No hormones
- Non-GMO fed
- Organic

DAIRY

- Same as meat standard
- Raw, unpasteurised
- Fermented
- Live active cultures
- Full-fat
- A2
- Goat or sheep

FISH & SEAFOOD

For the lowest toxin fish, remember SMASH: salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines and herrin

Avoid large fish like tuna

- Sustainably caught
- Wild caught
- Non-GMO fed (if farmed)
- No added colours
- No sodium tripolyphosphate
- Third-party verification

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Types of oil

Different types of oils have different thresholds of heat tolerance. Once an oil reaches its smoking point, it will chemically alter its structure and cause toxic fumes and free radicals - substances that can damage cells.

HIGH HEAT	SOLID = SATURATED = SAFE TO HEAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coconut oil• Butter & ghee• Red palm oil• Duck fat• Goose fat• Lard
LOW HEAT	MONOUNSATURATED = MODERATE HEAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Olive oil• Avocado oil <p><i>*if quality, can handle higher heat because of protective polyphenol content</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sesame oil• Macadamia oil
DO NOT HEAT	POLYUNSATURATED = PROTECT AS FRAGILE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Almond oil• Flaxseed oil• Pumpkin seed oil• Grapeseed oil• Hemp oil• Walnut oil• Fish and cod liver oil• Any omegas
TO NOT EAT	DAMAGED INFLAMMATORY RANCID TOXIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Canola oil• Corn oil• Soybean oil• Rapeseed oil• Sunflower oil• Safflower oil• Vegetable oil• Hydrogenated oils

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Types of Sugars

Obvious sugar		<i>obvious sugar is processed, sweet tasting, and often listed on the label</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Candy and sweets• Ice cream• Cookies, cake etc• Sweetened beverages• Syrups and jams• Baking sugar• Corn syrup
Sneaky sugar		<i>sneaky sugars are often hidden in food products marketed to be 'healthy'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yoghurt• Granola• Energy bars• Smoothies• Salad dressings• Nut butters• Kombucha
Fruit sugar		<i>fruit sugar metabolism is aided by the fibre, enzymes and nutrients also contained in whole fruit</i>	<p>Low sugar fruits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Berries• Melons• Citrus <p>high sugar fruits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tropical• Grapes
Pre-sugar		<i>pre-sugars do not necessarily taste sweet, but convert to glucose in your body almost immediately</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• bread• pasta• cereal• crackers• pretzels• anything with flour• potato products

Sweetener Guide

Carbohydrate tolerance is very bio-individual. Some people can handle moderate amounts of whole food sugars without issue. However, if you have symptoms of blood sugar imbalance or dysbiosis, it is best to limit all sweeteners (even zero-calorie alternatives).

LEVEL 1 – WHOLEFOOD SUGARS

- raw honey
- real maple syrup
- molasses
- date syrup
- monkfruit

LEVEL 2 – OKAY IN SMALL AMOUNTS

- stevia
- coconut sugar
- agave nectar
- turbinado sugar

LEVEL 3 – AVOID WHENEVER POSSIBLE

- raw sugar
- white sugar
- brown sugar
- xylitol
- erythritol

LEVEL 4 – AVOID UNDER ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

- corn syrup
- high fructose corn syrup
- sucralose
- aspartame

Food Additives

More than 3,000 substances can be added to foods for the purpose of preservation, colouring, texture, increasing flavour and more. While each of these substances is legal to use whether or not you want to be consuming is another story altogether.

The food colourings that make candy a pretty colour, for example, have been linked to cancer and tumours of the brain, thyroid, adrenal gland and kidney in animal studies. With any processed food you run the risk of coming across additives and reading through ingredient labels can be like trying to decode a puzzle.

Of course, eating largely fresh, whole foods is the best way to stay away from unsavoury additives, but, assuming you do include some processed foods in your diet, the following additives are ones you surely want to stay away from. Look for them on ingredient labels and if one turns up, take a pass.

BHA and BHT

Butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) and butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) are used similarly to propyl gallate - to keep fats and oils from going rancid. Used commonly in cereals, chewing gum, vegetable oil and potato chips (and also in some food packaging to preserve freshness), these additives have been found by some studies to cause cancer in rats. If a brand you commonly buy these additives, look for a different variety, as not all manufacturers use these preservatives.

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)

MSG is used as a flavour enhancer in many packaged foods, including soups, salad dressings, sausages, hot dogs, canned tuna, potato chips and many more. Many consumers have personally experienced the ill effects of MSG, which leave them with a headache, nausea or vomiting after eating MSG-containing foods.

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Aspartame (Equal, NutraSweet)

This artificial sweetener is found in Equal and NutraSweet, along with products that contain them (diet sodas and other low-cal and diet foods). This sweetener has been found to cause brain tumors in rats as far back as the 1970s, however, a more recent study in 2005 found that even in small doses increase the incidence of lymphomas and leukaemia in rats.

Acesulfame-K

Acesulfame-K is an artificial sweetener that's about 200 times sweeter than sugar. It's used in baked goods, chewing gum, gelatine desserts and soft drinks. Two rat studies have found that this substance may cause cancer, and other studies to reliably prove this additive's safety have not been conducted. Acesulfame-K also breaks down into acetoacetamide, which has been found to affect the thyroid in rats, rabbits and dogs.

Sodium Nitrite (Sodium Nitrate)

Sodium nitrite (or sodium nitrate) is used as a preservative, colouring and flavouring in bacon, ham, hot dogs, luncheon meats, corned beef, smoked fish and other processed meats. These additives can lead to the formation of cancer-causing chemicals called nitrosamines.

Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil

The process used to make hydrogenated vegetable oil (or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil) creates trans fats, which promote heart disease and diabetes. The Institute of Medicine has advised that consumers should eat as little trans-fat as possible. You should avoid anything with these ingredients on the label, which includes some margarine, vegetable shortening, crackers, cookies, baked goods, salad dressings, bread and more. It's used because it reduces cost and increases the shelf life and flavour stability of foods.

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Blue # 1 and blue #2

Blue 1, used to colour candy, beverages and baked goods, may cause cancer. Blue 2, found in pet food, candy and beverages, has caused brain tumours in mice.

Red # 3

This food colouring is used in cherries (in fruit cocktails), baked goods and candy. It has been linked to thyroid tumours in rats. Red # 3 has also been linked to behaviour associated with Attention Deficit Disorder.

Yellow # 6

As the third most often used food colouring, yellow 6 is found in many products, including baked goods, candy, gelatine and sausages. It has been found to cause adrenal gland and kidney tumours and contains small amounts of many carcinogens.

I hope you found this
ebook informative.

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questions or want to
find out more about
how I can support
your wellness journey
go to
www.eatforlife.co.uk
or email
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