Making sense of food labels

Labels provide us with useful information but remember they are also there to help sell the product! You need to look more closely if you really want to understand what you are eating.

How much sugar, salt and calories should we be eating?

Here are the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines for average adults of normal weight:

Each Day	Women	Men
Calories	2000	2500
Sugar	25g (6 tsp)	31g (8 tsp)
Sodium	2g	2g
Salt	5g	5g

Food labels

Ingredients are listed in order of weight. The first ingredient has the greatest % content and the last the smallest. Food labels illustrate the fat, carbohydrate, sugar and calorie content per 100g. Remember that this gives you the percentage: 20g sugar per 100g = 20% sugar. How do you know what is a little and what is a lot when it comes to fat, sugar and salt?

per 100g	A Lot	A Little
Sugars	10g	2g
Salt	1.25g	0.25g
Sodium	0.5g	0.1g

Carbohydrates

When buying starchy foods, such as bread, rice and pasta, look for wholegrain / whole wheat / wholemeal. Avoid any form of sugar, white or refined foods and look out for hidden starches in the ingredients list such as potato starch, corn starch, rice starch – all of these will be broken down into sugar by the body.

Sugar is known by many different names:

glucose-fructose syrup*
(* = high-fructose corn syrup)

glucose
fructose
sucrose
dextrose
maltose
lactose
isoglucose*

syrup
honey
treacle
agave
fruit juice
dates
dried fruit
raisins/sultanas

Glycaemic Index (GI)

You cannot calculate the GI of a food from the carbohydrate content on the label. It must be tested physiologically on live subjects, measuring how quickly blood glucose levels rise and fall.

High GI	70 and above
Medium GI	56 - 69
Low GI	55 and below

Glycaemic Load (GL)

If you know the GI value of a food, it is possible to calculate the GL of a particular serving size. However, it is a complex process and we would instead recommend simply identifying if the food is high, medium or low GL, based on what you have learned so far. If you really feel the need to know an accurate GL value, you could look it up on a reference website such as this one **http://nutritiondata.self.com**

Be label-savvy

When you see a claim in large print, such as "No added sugar" or "30% less sugar", take a closer look at the label. The manufacturer will want the low-sugar version to match the taste of the original as closely as possible. A popular trick is to add maltodextrin – a polysaccharide and therefore technically a starch, not a sugar. However, it is still broken down into sugar very quickly! When you see "50% fewer calories", read the label. The product will be lower in fat than the original, but has to be higher in carbohydrate. For example, a packet of crisps – made of fried potato slices and salt – is not a healthy food and is high in calories. A packet of 'healthy' crisps right next to it may be lower in calories and 'baked', but contains: potato starch, maize starch, rice starch and maltodextrin. Is that a healthy crisp?

'Fat' food labels

Trans fats

Avoid anything on a food label that says 'hydrogenated' – including 'partially hydrogenated'. These are trans fats, damaged fats, which are unhealthy.

Low fat

Items with no more than 3g fat per 100g may be labelled 'low fat'. Reducing the fat content of foods dramatically reduces their calorie content, because fat has 9kcal/g, whereas carbohydrates have only 4kcal/g. Removing fat from foods affects their flavour and texture, which is usually remedied by adding sugar. Voilá: a lower calorie product ... but with a higher GL than the original.

Additives

E.g. colourings, flavourings, preservatives, thickeners, etc. Additives deemed safe by the EU are given an E number. However, they can have effects in some people. For example E155 can trigger asthma in some people. In general, reducing your additive intake is a good thing and you can do this by eating less processed food and more whole organic foods.

Lite

In what? - Colour?!

The problem with calories

It's not that calories don't matter at all, but they matter much less than we have been led to believe. Metabolism is much too complex to be reduced to the simple calorie equation of "calories in < calories out = weight loss" and "calories in > calories out = weight gain". This simplistic approach dismisses the metabolic effects foods have once we have eaten them, suggesting that the result of ingesting 150 kcal from a fizzy drink has the same effect on our weight as 150 kcal from raw almonds, but this is simply not the case.