

Making sense of food labels

Do you know what 'Lite' on food packaging really means? Is it a product that is low in salt or is it low-fat or fat-free? Food labels can easily be confusing and even misleading, so to help you make healthier choices, it would be useful to wise-up on food labelling.

In South Africa, The Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act set out how products should be labelled and advertised. In the past, food manufacturers could easily 'stretch' their claims, so a new stricter set of regulations were proposed in order to protect the consumer from false or misleading claims. Although these new regulations are not yet law, food manufacturers are moving towards complying with them. Some of the guidelines that have been proposed include:

Nutritional claims need to be backed up by providing the exact amounts in the nutritional information breakdown. Here are some examples of maximum levels allowed for specific claims:

Low Fat:	3 g per 100 g (solids) or 1,5 g per 100 ml (liquids)
Fat free:	0, 5 g per 100 g/ml
Low saturated fat:	1.5 g per 100 g (solids) or 0.75 g per 100 ml (liquids) and 0.1 g trans fats combined per 100 g
Trans fat free:	0, 1 g per 100 g/ml
Cholesterol free:	5 mg per 100g/ml and 2 g saturated & trans fats combined per 100 g (solids)
Sugar free:	0.5 g sugar per 100 g/ml
Low sodium:	120 mg per 100g
Sodium free:	5 mg per 100g

Health claims linking dietary guidelines to various diseases (e.g. diets low in total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease) can only be made if certain criteria are met.

Ingredients must be listed in order of descending mass – this means that if, for example fat appears high on the list, there is a good chance that the product is high in fat. It will also help you to compare similar products and to avoid ingredients that you don't want to eat.

Prohibited statements or words that may not appear on products include those such as: 'healthy', 'wholesome', 'nutritious', 'heal', 'cure', 'suitable for diabetics'.

Misleading descriptions like 'natural' cannot be used if the food has been processed.

Food additives such as flavourants, colourants or preservatives must be labelled, e.g. tartrazine, monosodium glutamate (MSG), etc.

Some tips when reading labels

To lower your risk of cardiovascular disease, try to look for foods that are low in total fat, saturated fat, trans fats, cholesterol and salt but are high in fibre.

Total fat: too much fat may contribute to cardiovascular disease. Choose 'low fat' foods that contain no more than 3g fat/100g (for solids) or 'fat free' products. If you need to lose weight - be careful of some fat-free foods that can be very high in sugar and total energy.

Saturated fat: this is part of the total fat in food and is the key player in raising cholesterol levels. It is mostly found in animal fats such as full cream dairy, cream, lard and butter, but watch out for some tropical plant fats such as palm kernel oil that may be found in coffee creamers, tea whiteners or chocolate.

Trans fats: in addition to having the same harmful effects as saturated fats, they also lower HDL (good) cholesterol levels. Look out for partially hydrogenated fats on the ingredient list as

they are the main source of trans fats. Try to cut down on processed foods, baked products and choose margarines that have a lower trans fat content.

Cholesterol: may also contribute to high blood cholesterol, so try to aim for less than 300mg of dietary cholesterol per day. Watch out for vegetable oils that may be labelled cholesterol-free: remember that only animal products contain cholesterol, so a vegetable oil will never contain cholesterol. Bear in mind that vegetable oil is still 100% fat even though it is cholesterol-free, so it will still contribute to your total fat intake.

Sodium: is also known as salt. A high sodium intake has been linked with high blood pressure in some people. Try to keep your sodium intake less than 2400 – 3000 mg per day.

Sugar: watch out for foods or beverages that state 'no sugar added', which may contain natural sugars that are not suitable for diabetics or for those who are watching their weight. Also look out for 'diabetic' products which may be sugar-free, but are often high in fat!

Be Heart Smart and Choose the Heart Mark!

If you are still daunted by all the technical information on labels, an easier guide to help you identify healthier choices would be to look for foods with the Heart Mark. Foods with the Heart Mark are lower in saturated fat, cholesterol, sugar and sodium and are high in fibre (if applicable). Heart Mark products have all been independently tested and have to meet stringent nutritional criteria (as set by the Heart and Stroke Foundation). So when you do your grocery shopping, choose foods with the Heart Mark.

For more information on general heart health contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222, email heart@heartfoundation.co.za or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za.

Written by Erika Ketterer, Registered Dietician at the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA.