

# FOOD LABELS MADE EASY

**DiABETES UK**  
KNOW DIABETES. FIGHT DIABETES.



# FOOD LABELS MADE EASY

**Healthy eating is important for everyone, whether you've got diabetes or not. That means eating more wholegrains, beans, peas, lentils, dhal, nuts, fish, fruit and vegetables, and choosing foods lower in salt, sugars and saturated fats.**

If you do have diabetes, making healthier food choices and understanding portion sizes will help you manage it. And being able to figure out food labels will make it easier. But they can be confusing, so we'll help you understand what to look out for.

So, next time you're at the shops, pop this booklet in your basket and you'll know exactly what you're buying.



# TRAFFIC LIGHT LABELS

Food companies don't have to put labels on the front of their packaging. If they do, they use what are called traffic light labels.

These tell you whether the product has low, medium or high amounts of fat, saturated fats, sugars and salt. They're designed to let you know at a glance how healthy or unhealthy something is and make it easy to compare similar products.

## Example of a front of pack label

Each 254g pack contains:				
Energy <b>2264kJ</b> <b>542kcal</b>	Fat <b>20g</b>	Saturates <b>6.4g</b>	Sugars <b>7.6g</b>	Salt <b>2.4g</b>
<b>27%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>42%</b>

## **Green** means low and a healthier choice.

These foods are low in fat, saturated fats, sugars and salt. Usually, the healthier the food, the more greens on the label.

**Amber** means medium. It's OK to have these foods some of the time.

**Red** means high. These foods are high in saturated fats, salt or sugars. If you choose to have them, only eat them occasionally and in small quantities.

## **Top tips for going green**

- 1** Choose water or diet soft drinks, instead of regular versions, which are usually red for sugar.
- 2** Pick low-salt options if they're available.
- 3** Be aware that low-fat products, like yogurts, are sometimes high in sugar to make up for the lack of fat.

Most foods will have a mix of traffic light colours. Pick items with more greens and ambers, and fewer reds.



The table below shows what value of fats, sugars and salts are considered low, medium or high in a food product. Lower values apply for drinks and larger portion sizes of food.

All measures per 100g	Low	Medium	High
<b>Fat</b>	3g or less	More than 3g to 17.5g	More than 17.5g
<b>Saturated fats</b>	1.5g or less	More than 1.5g to 5g	More than 5g
<b>Sugars</b>	5g or less	More than 5g to 22.5g	More than 22.5g
<b>Salt</b>	0.3g or less	More than 0.3g to 1.5g	More than 1.5g

The numbers for sugars don't tell you whether the sugars are natural, like in fruit, or added by the food company when the product is being made, like sucrose. You can find out more about different sugars on pages 7 and 8.

# REFERENCE INTAKES

**Reference Intakes, sometimes shortened to RI, can also be found on the front or the back of the packaging.**

There are recommended amounts for how much sugar, salt, fat and saturated fat everyone should eat and drink each day. A Reference Intake label tells you the percentage that item of food will contribute to these daily targets.

The Reference Intakes are circled in our example below. You can see that the salt content is 42% of your Reference Intake, or how much salt you should be having a day. That's very high.

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# CARBOHYDRATES

**Carbohydrates, also called carbs, are found in starchy foods like bread, potatoes, rice, pasta, chapattis, fruit, some dairy products, sugar and other sweet foods and drink.**

Carbs are broken down in to different types of sugar when you eat them, which your body uses for energy.

The 'of which sugars' amount tells you how much sugar the food or drink contains. It includes sugar that's naturally present like fructose – found in fruit – and lactose – found in dairy products – and sugar added by the food company like sucrose.

Sugar added to food can appear in the ingredients list as sucrose, fructose, glucose, syrup or honey.

All carbs increase your blood sugar levels.

If you're carb counting, count the 'total carbohydrate' amount, rather than 'of which sugars'.

You'll find the total carbohydrate information on labels at the back of the pack.

Watch out for free sugars too. Free sugar is any sugar added by the food manufacturer to food or drink.

Honey, syrups and fruit juices are also free sugars.

This type of sugar is not healthy as it can increase your risk of heart disease, as well as make you more likely to put on weight.

To see if something is high in free sugar, also called added sugar, check the ingredients list. The more of an ingredient there is in a product, the earlier it will appear in the list.



Artificial or low-calorie sweeteners can be a useful alternative to sugar.



# ENERGY

**This is the amount of calories that a food or drink provides.**

To gain weight, you'll need to eat and drink more calories than you use.

If you want to stay the same weight, you'll need to balance the calories you use with the calories you get from your food and drink.



If you want to lose weight, get support from your diabetes team. Usually they'll help you make a plan to eat fewer calories and do some more physical activity. It's a bit more complicated than just eating fewer calories, so getting support from your healthcare team is important.

# SATURATED FATS

**Cutting down on all fat is one way to reduce your calories, but not everyone needs to do this.**

Saturated fats are linked to high cholesterol, which can lead to heart disease and stroke, so everyone should try to cut down on these.

Use unsaturated fats and oils, like olive oil, as they're better for your heart.

Low saturated fat means a food product has 1.5g of saturated fats or less in every 100g.

# SALT

## **Salt is sometimes listed as sodium or sodium chloride.**

It's the sodium in salt that's bad for your health. Too much salt can cause high blood pressure, which increases your risk of heart disease and stroke.

About 75% of the salt we eat is from pre-prepared foods, like ready meals. Using the traffic light labels to pick green or amber products will help you to avoid too much salt.

You can reduce the amount of salt you use in your cooking by using spices and herbs to season your food.

# FIBRE

**Fibre is the part of plant food that our body can't completely break down.**

**Soluble fibre** can help manage your blood sugar and cholesterol levels. It's found in wholegrain foods, pulses, oats, fruit and vegetables.

**Insoluble fibre** keeps your digestive system healthy. It's found in high-fibre cereals and bread, fruit and vegetables.

Wholegrains, beans, peas, lentils, dhal, fruit and vegetables have a good mixture of soluble and insoluble fibre.



# TOP TIPS FOR UNDERSTANDING FOOD LABELS



1 The traffic light labels on the front of the packaging can help you spot whether a product contains lots of fats, sugars and salt or just a little.



2 Use the 'per 100g' column on the back label to compare what's in similar food. You can also use this to check against your actual serving size.

3 The 'per serving' column might also be on the back. Use this if you want to know the amount of fat, sugar and salt in the suggested portion.

Nutrition Values	Per 100g	Per serving
Energy	1225	784
Energy kcal	290	186
Fat	4.6g	2.9g
of which saturates	2.1g	1.3g
Carbohydrate	53.4g	34.2g
of which sugars	2.4g	1.5g
Fibre	2.7g	1.7g
Protein	7.4g	4.7g
Salt	0.75g	0.48g

- 4 Always check what the food company suggests is a portion size, as it might be different from what you think or would normally eat.
- 5 Remember you don't need to avoid all food and drink that contains a lot of fats, sugars or salt. If an item has lots of reds on the front of the packaging, only eat it occasionally and in small amounts. Try to pick items with lots of greens and sometimes ambers. It's the overall balance of your diet that counts.
- 6 Make sure to avoid any food products labelled as 'diabetic.' It's illegal to label foods with 'diabetic' in the UK, but be careful with anything you buy online as well. Despite their name, these products don't offer any special benefit for people with diabetes.

# EAT WELL

If you want loads more great hints and tips about eating well, visit our website at [diabetes.org.uk/food-tips](https://diabetes.org.uk/food-tips)



Along with healthy swaps, how-to guides and the latest foodie trends, you'll find simple, tasty, healthy recipes to inspire you in the kitchen.

# GET SUPPORT



You can get dietary advice especially for you. Everyone with diabetes is able to see a registered dietitian on the NHS. Just ask your doctor, nurse or diabetes team to refer you.

## Diabetes UK Helpline

Our specially trained advisors can help you understand more about your diabetes. They can give you practical advice, help you solve everyday problems or just be there for you when you're having a difficult time.

**0345 123 2399**

**helpline@diabetes.org.uk**

Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm

Search **Diabetes UK** on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok



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