Reading Food Labels

If you want to eat well when buying packaged food, it is useful to check the ingredients list and nutrition information panel. But food labels can be confusing. What you think a food label means and what it actually means could be two different things. Food labels usually tell you about the positive parts of a food but can fail to tell you the whole story. Here are tips on what to look for.

**What is regulated?**

The government has rules or regulations about the statements that food companies can make on food labels.

The Food Standards Code has rules on nutrition, health and related claims. Food companies can make statements about the nutrients or substances in their food, if it meets the requirements of the Code. For example, foods labelled ‘high in calcium’ must have a certain level of calcium. Companies can also describe the nutrient’s effect on health if it meets the conditions in the Code. For example, ‘calcium is good for bones’. Find out more about nutrient claims [here](https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/256943/TT_nutrientclaim_20181108.pdf)[[1]](#footnote-1).

The Australian Consumer Law makes sure that food companies do not make statements that are incorrect or that could cause a false impression. This rule applies to food advertising, product labels and any information given to you by food companies’ staff or online. This is enforced by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission ([ACCC](https://www.accc.gov.au/)).

# What should I look out for?

Food labels don’t just have factual nutrition information. They are designed to influence you to buy the product. Words used can imply that the food is healthier or better than similar foods. Here are some examples.

**Health halo**

Words like *‘healthy’*, *‘natural’*, *‘real’* or *‘fresh’* are subjective. There are no rules around when companies can use them. They can be a sneaky way to make you think a food is a good choice when it is not.

**No artificial colours, flavours or additives**

The food may still contain colours, flavours or additives that are produced naturally. Foods with these claims can also be high in sugar, fat or salt.

**No added sugar**

Sugar may not have been added to the food, but that doesn’t mean it is sugar-free. Dried fruit, honey, maple syrup and fruit juice are all high in natural sugar. It is best to check the nutrition information panel (NIP) to find out how much sugar is in the food.

**Baked not fried**

These foods can have the same amount of energy and fat as fried foods – it’s just added before baking.

**Free from…**

There are many foods that have been made for people with medical conditions. For example, ‘gluten free’ or ‘lactose free’ foods. This means these foods are safe for people with conditions such as coeliac disease or lactose intolerance. It doesn’t mean they are a better choice than regular foods for people who do not have a medical need for these foods.

**Vegan friendly**

This means that no animal products are in the food. It does not necessarily mean that food is a healthy choice. Chips, chocolate and sweet biscuits can all be labelled as vegan, but these foods are not an everyday choice for anyone.

# What about personal values, beliefs and ethics?

Some food labels have information that relates to personal values, beliefs or ethics, such as:

* religious beliefs, such as Kosher or Halal certified food
* environmental concerns such as organic or carbon footprint labelling
* animal welfare concerns such as RSPCA approved or free-range labelling
* human rights issues such as fair trade or child labour labelling.

Companies can choose whether they put this type of information on their food labels. If the information you want isn’t on the label, you can contact the supplier directly. All foods that have a label must have the name and address of the supplier and many give a free call telephone number. Under Australian Consumer Law, this type of information cannot be deceptive, misleading or false. It is important to know, however, that not all terms used for this kind of information have consistent or strict standards that companies have to meet.

# More information

[Reading Food Labels - A guide to better choices](https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/community_nutrition/health_and_community_workers/pregnancy_and_early_childhood_0-5/resources_for_child_and_family_health_nurses/tucker_talk/other_topics/food_labels)[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. <https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/256943/TT_nutrientclaim_20181108.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/community_nutrition/health_and_community_workers/pregnancy_and_early_childhood_0-5/resources_for_child_and_family_health_nurses/tucker_talk/other_topics/food_labels> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)