

# Reading Between the Food Labels

With more than 20 000 supermarket stock items available to us, an understanding on 'Reading Between the Food Labels' will help you make healthy choices.

The introduction of the Food Standards Code on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2002 for manufactured and packaged foods in Australia and New Zealand has made Reading Food Labels easier to understand. By law most food labels must now provide certain information.

The example on the next 3 pages for "Macadamian Slice Biscuits" demonstrates the information that is required on food labels and how this information can be interpreted.

# Macadamian Slice Biscuits

1. Name or description of the food

200 g net

2. Number of serves per package and serving size

**Nutrition Information:**  
Servings per package: 7  
Serving Size: 30 g

97% Fat Free  
Gluten Free

3. Nutrition Information Panel. These must appear on all packaged foods.

NUTRITION INFORMATION PANEL		
	Per Serve (30g)	Per 100g
ENERGY (kJ)	670	1900
PROTEIN (g)	6.3	21
FAT - total (g)	1.0	2.8
- saturated (g)	0.8	2.5
CARBOHYDRATE - total (g)	22.7	68.1
- sugars (g)	4.2	12.5
DIETARY FIBRE (g)	1.2	3.5
SODIUM (mg)	263	750
GLUTEN	0	0

4. **Nutritional Claims.** If a product makes a claim such as "97% fat free" or "Gluten-Free", information must be given about that nutrient in the "Nutrition Information Panel". In this case, because a "Gluten-Free" claim is made, gluten must be listed in the panel as 0, nil or no detectable gluten.

## **5. Information about specific nutrients both per serve and per 100g.**

The key nutrients on the "Nutrition Information Panel" includes: **energy (kilojoules, kj)**, **total and saturated fat**, **total carbohydrate and sugars and Glycaemic Index (GI)**, **dietary fibre** (only needs to be listed when claims are made), and **sodium**.

### **ENERGY**

Being overweight is related to many chronic diseases and eating fewer kilojoules will reduce weight. Therefore, look at the amount of kilojoules on the nutrition panel, and where possible, choose the product with the lower amount.

### **FAT - total**

High fat foods tend to be high in kilojoules. The lower the fat content, the healthier the food is:

CHOOSE: BREAKFAST CEREALS - less than 5g per 100g

BISCUITS - less than 10g per 100g

MILK AND YOGHURT - less than 2g per 100g

ICE CREAM - less than 2.5g per 100g

OTHER FOODS - less than 10g per 100g

As the product example: "Macadamian Slice" are biscuits, and it is less than 2.8 g per 100g, then it is generally regarded as a low fat product, but is also less than 3 g of fat and fits in with the claim of being 97% fat free (see 5: Nutrition Claim and below for explanation of "nutritional claims" on food labels).

### **FAT - saturated**

Diets high in saturated fats cause LDL ("bad") cholesterol levels to rise, clogging the blood vessels and increasing the risk of heart disease. Choose the food item with the least amount of saturated fat on the nutrition panel.

### **CARBOHYDRATE - total and GI**

Carbohydrate foods are the best energy source for your body. When they are digested they break down to form glucose in the blood stream, but they do so at different rates - some slow and some fast. The **Glycaemic Index** or **GI** describes the way the carbohydrate affects your blood glucose levels. Foods with a low GI raise blood glucose more slowly (compared to foods with a high GI) and are recommended for weight control. As some foods with a low GI also contain a high amount of fat, only those foods that follow the Australian Dietary Guidelines (low in saturated fat, low in sodium and high in dietary fibre) can carry the GI symbol.

### **CARBOHYDRATES - sugars**

Sugars in the nutrition panel includes, naturally occurring sugar in fruits and milk and added sugars. For weight control, it is best to choose foods with less sugar.

### **DIETARY FIBRE**

High fibre foods help fill you up and get the bowels moving. You should aim for at least 30g of dietary fibre per day or products that contain AT LEAST 3g OF DIETARY FIBRE PER 100g.

The product outlined in the example above has a fibre content of 3.5g per 100g fits into the criteria for suitable fibre product.

### **SODIUM**

Sodium or salt can occur in large amounts in some foods including cheese, canned foods, processed meats and some cereals. Wherever possible, look for salt free or salt reduced products. Look for foods WITH LESS THAN 400mg OF SODIUM PER 100g. At 750mg of sodium per 100g, "Macadamian Slice Biscuits" does NOT represent a low sodium product.

### **GLUTEN**

If a product makes a claim such as low in fat or gluten free for example, information must be given about that nutrient in the nutrition information panel. In this case, because a "Gluten Free" claim is made, gluten must be listed in the panel.

**Ingredients:** RICE FLOUR, CANE SUGAR, MACADAMIAN NUT 6%, VEGETABLE OIL, THICKNER (1422), SALT, MAISE MALTODEXTRIN, YEAST, RAISING AGENT (E336, E500), EMULSIFIER (E322-SOY), MILK SOLIDS, MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF EGG OR SEED.

**6. Ingredients list.**

Ingredients must be listed in decending order of the amount present in the food.

**7. Mandatory declaration in the ingredients list of the grain source ingredients, compound ingredients, additives and processing aids.**

The thickener (1422) would be interpreted as being "Gluten-Free" as it has not been listed as being from a gluten containing grain such as wheat.

**8. Percentage Labeling.**

The ingredient list of products must now state the percentage of the characterizing ingredient or ingredients in the food. In this example, the characterizing item is "Macadamian Nuts", present as 6% of the food.

**9. More information for allergy sufferers.** The main foods or food ingredients that can cause in some individuals severe adverse reactions - such as peanuts and other nuts, seafood, fish, milk, gluten, eggs and soybeans - must be declared on the label however small the amount. In the case of "Macadamian Slice Biscuits" this declaration is in the Ingredients List.

There must also be an advisory statement on the label where people may be unaware of the possible health risk posed by unpasteurised milk or egg, aspartame, quinine, caffeine in beverages and warning statements where people may be unaware of a severe health risk posed by an allergen in a food. Example. Royal Jelly which can cause severe reactions in asthmatics.

## **Making Sense of the Nutrition Claims**

### **1) Labels must tell the truth!**

Suppliers must label food products with accurate minimum weights and measures information. Manufacturers can face fines of up to \$100 000 for misleading or incorrect labeling of food products.

The name or description of the product should not be misleading. For example, a strawberry yoghurt must contain strawberries.

### **2) Cholesterol free**

Many cholesterol free products are still high in fat, even saturated fat. Check the fat content on the nutrition panel. For example, cooking oils which claim to be 100% cholesterol free are still 100% fat.

### **3) Oven baked, not fried**

If the product is brown and crunchy it has probably been sprayed with oil before baking and may contain as much fat as the fried variety. Check the fat content on the nutrition label to interpret this claim.

### **4) "Sugar free" or "no added sugar"**

This usually means free of sucrose, but other types of sugar may be present which contain the same amount of energy (eg. fructose, malt extract, corn syrup).

### **5) "Lite" or "Light"**

These terms may refer to being light in colour, flavour, texture, taste or fat content of the food. It does not necessarily mean a healthy or low fat choice. E.g. "lite" crisps have just as much fat as a standard crisp. The nutrition information panel will reveal whether the product really is low in fat by comparing the fat content per 100g on the back with similar products.

### **6) Reduced Fat**

Reduced fat does not mean less fat compared to the product next to it, but less fat compared to the manufacturer's normal product of that type. Check the nutrition information panel to determine the level of fat. E.g. reduced fat cheeses may still contain as much as 25% fat.

### **7) Cholesterol Free**

These products may not contain cholesterol, but it doesn't mean that they are low in saturated fats which can increase you blood cholesterol. Eg.

Cholesterol free frozen potato chips are high in saturated fat because they are cooked in palm oil.

**8) 93% Fat Free**

This statement is not a trick, but you do have to think backwards to sort it out. 93% fat free still means it still contains 7% fat.

**9) National Heart Foundation Tick**

Developed and managed by the National Heart Foundation, the "Pick the Tick" campaign and its well known tick can be a guide for product selection. The campaign is voluntary and companies pay money to display the tick on their packaging. To be approved to carry the tick the products must meet strict criteria for the fat, salt, sugar and fibre contents. It is only found on some types of foods and doesn't necessarily mean it is the best choice, but only a guide. Food such as bread, pasta, fresh fruit and vegetables are healthy choices although no tick appears on these products.

## **Summary**

Surveys have shown that a high proportion of people use food labels to understand the foods they buy and that the people who read nutrition labels have better diets. The aim of this article is to help you "Read Between the Labels" and have a healthy lunchbox and eating plan for the whole family.

The information above will help you to choose healthier and tastier foods from the large number of available products by "Reading Between the Food Labels".

**References:**

"Understanding Food Labels" Diet Sheet used by Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at Nambour General Hospital.

[www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)

[www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au)

Eating Gluten Free: Anne Brown APD