



## Understanding food labels

# High, medium, low

The new 'traffic light' food labelling system makes eating a healthy diet a little easier, says **Sinéad Hanley**

**A** common query to the Diabetes Ireland helpline and at public meetings is about understanding food labelling in relation to diabetes.

As we all know there is no special diet for people with diabetes; the advice is the same as for the general population – to eat healthily. So people with diabetes

should look on labels for the same things as everyone else.

We all need to be mindful of choosing foods that are lower in fat, sugars and salt. But labels and nutrition claims can be confusing.

Food labels give details such as the weight of the item and the best-before

# NUTRITION

## TRAFFIC LIGHT LABELLING

	SUGARS	FAT	SATURATES	SALT
<b>HIGH</b> per 100g	Over 15g	Over 20g	Over 5g	Over 1.5g
<b>MEDIUM</b> per 100g	Between 5g and 15g	Over 3g and 20g	Between 1.5g and 5g	Between 0.3g and 1.5g
<b>LOW</b> per 100g	5g and below	3g and below	1.5g and below	0.3g and below

date. Most will also provide all *or* some of the following:

- The ingredients
- Nutritional information
- 'Health' and 'nutrition' claims
- Guideline daily amounts (GDAs)
- Traffic light labelling.

### The ingredients

All the ingredients are listed in order of their descending weight. This means that the food contains more of the ingredients listed first and less of those listed at the end of the list. For example, the closer sugar is listed to the top of the list of ingredients, the more sugar the food contains.

Sugar can be described by many different names including:

- Sucrose
- Glucose
- Glucose syrup
- Fructose
- Glucose-fructose syrup
- Maltose
- Maltodextrin
- Invert sugar
- Golden syrup
- Maple syrup
- Molasses
- Honey.

But remember with diabetes it's not just sugar we need to look at on the label, it's the total amount of carbohydrate as all carbohydrates are digested and converted to glucose in the blood.

Fat can also go by many names on a list of ingredients, for example:

- Butter
- Dripping
- Lard
- Milk fat
- Cream
- Vegetable oil
- Vegetable fat
- Peanut oil (or other nut oil)
- Monoglycerides
- Trans fats
- Hydrogenated fat.

Most foods contain a mix of monounsaturated, polyunsaturated and saturated fats.

Monounsaturated fats are better fats to select and they include:

- Olive oil
- Rapeseed oil.

Polyunsaturated fats are also good choices and include:

- Sunflower oil
- Corn oil.

Food containing omega 3 oils are a good choice and include:

- Oily fish
- Linseeds.

Saturated fats are less healthy and are found in animal products such as:

- Red meats
- Butter
- Cream.

Try to avoid trans fats. They include hydrogenated oil, which is mainly found in highly processed foods.

### Nutritional information – quantity

The nutritional information on the label tells you how much of each nutrient the food product contains per 100g (weight), or per 100ml (liquid amount) of fluid. It can also break this down per serving, for example per bar, per slice, per pot of yogurt.

### Nutritional information – calories

Some food manufacturers list energy (Kjoules and kcal or calories) and three main nutrients: protein, carbohydrate and fat. Others provide a more extended nutrient list that includes sugar, saturated fat, fibre, sodium and sometimes vitamins and/or minerals.

### Recommended daily allowance (RDA)

The RDA is the recommended daily allowance – how much you need of any nutrient each day. If a vitamin or mineral is listed in the nutritional information, then the percentages of the RDA for that nutrient per 100g and per portion is also provided.

### How to compare products

If you want to know whether a food is high or low in a particular nutrient or want to compare the nutrient content of similar foods, then check out nutrient content per 100g or per 100ml. For example, if you want to know which hard cheese contains the least amount of fat then you would compare the fat content per 100g across

the different hard cheeses. Looking at the label can also help you decide whether or not the product contains ‘a little’ or ‘a lot’ of fat, sugar, salt and fibre (see Table 1 and Table 2).

## How to calculate salt

Usually the more processed a food is, the more likely it is to have a high salt content. Avoid salty foods such as packet soups, crisps, take-away food and salted/cured meats.

For people monitoring their salt intake, be aware that sodium content is not the same as salt content. To convert sodium to salt, multiply the sodium value by 2.5 to get the correct salt content.

## ‘Traffic light’ labelling

You may have noticed there is a traffic light label on the front of some of the products you buy. This tells you at a glance if the food has high, medium or low amounts of sugars, fat, saturates and salt. See *Traffic light labelling* chart.

- Red means high
- Amber means medium
- Green means low

In short, the more green lights on a product, the healthier a choice it is. Everybody should choose foods which are lower in sugars, fats and salt.

**Remember:** With diabetes it isn’t just about looking at the amount of sugar on the label, you also need to be aware of the total carbohydrate in the foods that you choose.

## Other important information

**Guideline daily amounts:** Guideline daily amounts (GDA) are for adults not children.

**Counting carbs:** If you or your child are carb counting, use the carbohydrate value from the full nutritional label (this includes starches and sugars) and not ‘sugars’ from the traffic light label on the front.

**‘Low in fat’:** Be aware that some products labelled ‘Low in fat’ can be higher in sugar than the original version so are not always better.

**TABLE 1: FOOD LABELS – THE PER 100G VALUE**

	This is ‘a little’ per 100g of food	This is ‘a lot’ per 100g of food
<b>Fat</b>	3g of fat or less	20g of fat or more
<b>Saturated fat</b>	1.5g of saturated fat or less	5g of saturated fat or more
<b>Sugars</b>	5g of sugars or less	15g of sugars or more
<b>Sodium</b>	0.1g of sodium or less	0.6g of sodium or more
<b>Salt</b>	0.3g of salt or less	1.5g of salt or more

**TABLE 2: HEALTH CLAIMS – WHAT DO THEY MEAN?**

<b>Fats</b>	
<b>Low fat</b>	To help you choose lower fat options more easily, look for the nutrition claims – ‘Low fat’. This indicates the food contains less than 3g fat per 100g (weight) or 100ml (liquid amount) of the food
<b>Reduced fat</b>	The food must contain 25% less fat than a similar standard product. It does not mean the product is necessarily low in fat
<b>Less than 5% fat (or 95% fat free)</b>	This indicates that the food contains less than 5g fat per 100g
<b>Sugars</b>	
<b>No added sugar</b>	No sugars from any source have been added. It may still contain a lot of natural sugar like the fruit sugar in fruit juice
<b>Low sugar</b>	It contains no more than 5g of sugar per 100g or 100ml of food
<b>Reduced sugar</b>	It must contain 25% less sugar than the regular product
<b>Fibre</b>	
<b>High fibre</b>	It must contain at least 6g in 100g

**Largest comes first:** Ingredients are listed with the largest quantity ingredient first, so if you want to know if a product has a lot of one particular ingredient it will be one of the first four listed.

**False claims are illegal:** It is illegal to make false claims on foods, but food com-

panies do not have to provide nutritional information unless they make a health claim such as ‘low sugar’.

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