

# So you have Diabetes:

what do you need to know when it comes to food labels?



Protein  
Carbohydrate  
(of which sugars)  
Fat  
(of which saturates)  
Fibre  
Sodium  
Salt equivalent

# So you have diabetes: What do you need to know when it comes to food labels?

Diabetes is a condition where there is too much glucose (sugar) in the blood. Glucose is our main energy source and comes from carbohydrates. Glucose is essential but complications can occur if blood glucose levels remain too high over a long period of time.

Your glucose level can vary depending on:

- > the amount and type of carbohydrate in food and drinks
- > your prescribed diabetes medication
- > the amount and type of activity you take.

You should aim for a healthy balanced diet which includes starchy carbohydrates, is low in sugar and fat, high in fibre, fruit and vegetables.

## What's important when you have diabetes?

The first and most important thing is you need to understand it's NOT ALL about SUGAR!!!

Having diabetes means you need to be more aware of

**ALL** carbohydrate sources as it's the **amount** of carbohydrate rather than the **type** that impacts on your blood glucose level more.



## What are carbohydrates?

There are 3 main **sources**:

**1. SUGARS:** These are refined sugars from processed sweet foods for example; sweets, chocolates, cakes, biscuits, sweet drinks. These foods sit on the top shelf of our food pyramid.\* They are high in calories (energy) and can lead to weight gain so only have these as an occasional treat.



**2. NATURALLY OCCURRING SUGARS:** The two main sources are lactose contained in dairy foods such as milk and yogurts and fructose found in fruit. Further information on dairy and fruit is covered in the food pyramid.\*

**3. STARCHES:** This food group makes up most of our main meals so think cereals, potatoes, pasta, rice, noodles and breads. Starches provide energy and are digested to give us glucose just the same as sugary foods. **Starches are a better choice than sugary foods as they contain essential vitamins and fibre essential for health.**

It is the **amount** of carbohydrate that has more of an effect on blood glucose rather than the **type**.

So you should choose high fibre starches such as wholegrain breads, cereals, brown rice and pasta but be conscious of portion size.

Higher fibre foods release glucose more slowly and therefore keep us full for longer which can help with weight control. High fibre starches also help protect against heart disease, some cancers and helps prevent constipation.



\* Copies of the food pyramid are available on [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)

# Reading and understanding what a label is telling me

Food labels can give details such as:

- > the weight of the item
- > the ingredients
- > traffic light labelling and GDA (Guideline Daily Amount)
- > nutritional information.

## The Ingredients

All product ingredients are listed in order of their descending weight. This means that the product contains more of the ingredients first on the list; and less of those listed last.



Sugar can be described by many different names including sucrose, glucose, fructose, maltose, molasses and syrups.

Remember with diabetes, it's not just **sugar** we need to look at on the **label**, it's the total amount of **carbohydrate** contained in the product.



# Traffic light labelling

This can be found on the front of some foods and the colours, similar to traffic lights can be an easier way of reading a label.

	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	Between 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

**RED = HIGH**

**AMBER = MEDIUM**

**GREEN = LOW**

In short, the more green lights, the healthier the choice. Everybody should choose foods which are lower in sugars, fats and salt i.e. Green.

**With diabetes you need to be aware of the total carbohydrates (sugars and starches) in the foods that you choose. The traffic light label at the front only looks at the sugar so you need to also look at the total carbohydrate which is on the nutritional label at the back of the pack.**

## Using the example of a pack of digestive biscuits:

On the front of the pack you may find the nutritional value for 1 biscuit.

Each biscuit contains				
Energy 78kcal	Fat 3.6g	Saturates 1.8g	Sugars 2.7g	Salt 0.12
4%	5%	9%	3%	2%
of an adult's reference intake (Colours indicate per 100g serving)				

The nutritional information for the product, normally found on the side or back panel of the product is given as per 100g/ml and/or per serving.

Typical values	Per 100g	Per biscuit
Energy	2071kJ/490kcal	327kJ/78kcal
Protein	6.6g	1g
Carbohydrate	64.5g	10.2g
of which sugars	17g	2.7g
Fat	22.7g	3.6g
of which saturates	11.7g	1.8g
Fibre	2.8g	0.4g
Sodium	0.3g	0.05g
Salt equivalent	0.74g	0.12g

**So are these biscuits OK for me?**

Well the answer is....How many will I have? How do they fit into my overall food intake and activity for the day? Looking at the above images, 2 digestive biscuits have 5.4g (2.7g x2) of sugar but in total have 20.4g (10.2g x2) of carbohydrate so will raise glucose levels more than a yogurt or a piece of fruit as these can have roughly 15g of carbohydrate each.

**So a yogurt or a piece of fruit would be a better regular choice of snack rather than biscuits which have added sugars, fat and so should be limited to occasionally especially if you are trying to lose weight.**

**Guideline Daily Amount (GDAs)**

On most packs you will also find guidelines that help put nutrition information into the context of an overall diet. Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) are listed in the blue table, these are intended to help you work out how much of the different nutrients are supplied in the food.

**Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) for adults**

TYPICAL VALUES	WOMEN	MEN
Calories	2,000 kcal	2,500 kcal
Protein	45 g	55 g
Carbohydrate	230 g	300g
Sugars	90 g	120 g
Fat	70 g	95 g
Saturates	20 g	30 g
Fibre	24 g	24 g
Salt	6 g	6 g

## What about sweeteners?

All sweeteners licensed for use in Ireland are safe. These give a sweet taste to foods and have little or no effect on glucose levels. These are usually used in foods such as diet drinks and yogurts.

For more information on sweeteners and 'diabetic products' see [www.diabetes.ie](http://www.diabetes.ie) or [www.indi.ie](http://www.indi.ie)

## Important things to remember!

**Be aware that some products labelled 'Low in Fat' can be "higher in sugar" than the original version so are not always better.**

**Ingredients are listed with the largest ingredient first so if you want to know if a product has a lot of one particular ingredient it will be in the first 4 listed.**

**Guideline Daily Amounts are for adults not children.**

**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.**

**Try to plan meals and snacks around more fresh foods and avoid processed foods where possible.**

For further information on diabetes, food and suitable recipes for families living with diabetes please visit [www.diabetes.ie](http://www.diabetes.ie).

Other useful websites and sources of information

On Labelling [www.safefood.eu](http://www.safefood.eu)

On Nutrition [www.indi.ie](http://www.indi.ie)

Discover the difference by joining Diabetes Ireland today

Log onto **www.diabetes.ie**

Lo-call the Diabetes helpline on **1850 909 909**

WE FIGHT FOR BETTER SERVICES FOR YOU  
WE WANT WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU  
WE EXIST TO SUPPORT YOU



[www.diabetes.ie](http://www.diabetes.ie)

**DIABETES HELPLINE: 1850 909 909**

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