

Labels, the key to consumer choice

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To be able to choose a well-balanced, healthy diet, consumers need to understand what is in the food they buy. More importantly, allergy-sufferers need to be sure that they are not buying something with potentially unpleasant or, in some cases, serious, even fatal, consequences. Labels are key to communicating such vital information, but do consumers know what they should expect to find on them? And do they understand everything they do find?

The prime consideration for any rules on labelling foodstuffs is the need to inform and protect the consumer. Consumers can use the label information to choose the product they want for reasons of health, taste and convenience. Manufacturers rely heavily on labels to pass information on to consumers about their products (e.g. what they are, how they should be stored and for how long, etc) and to distinguish their products and brands from competing brands.

Whether it is printed on the packaging, or on labels attached to food products, producers are legally bound to provide certain information to European consumers. The name under which a product is sold should not be misleading or confusing. It must include or be accompanied by particulars as to the physical condition of the foodstuff, or the specific treatment it has undergone (e.g. frozen, powdered, smoked, UHT, concentrated, etc). The label should state the manufacturer's name and address. The net quantity of prepackaged foodstuffs should also be clear on the label as well as instructions for use, as necessary, and any special storage conditions.

List of ingredients

The ingredients used to make a food product may be of special interest to people on a weight-loss or medically-prescribed diet, or with an allergy. The law requires all ingredients to be listed in descending order of weight, with those used in greatest amounts (heaviest) listed first.

A recent change in the law means that each component of a compound ingredient (an ingredient composed of a number of different constituents) has to be indicated (except if it is already mentioned as an ingredient on its own). Categories of ingredients (e.g. "oil", "cheese", "vegetables") are now no longer sufficient on labels, and the actual type of oil, cheese or vegetables must be listed. Known allergens have to be labelled, without exception.

Legislation governing additives, sweeteners, flavourings, and food or food ingredients produced from genetically-modified organisms, all contain specific rules on labelling.

"Best before" and "use by" dates

Is the food you buy fresh enough to eat? Check the product date on the label. By law, food products should

carry a “best before” or a “use by” date. These two expressions mean different things.

- The “best before” date indicates the “minimum durability”, or the period during which the food retains its specific properties when properly stored. In other words, a product whose “best before” date has expired may still be safe to eat, but the manufacturer no longer guarantees the organoleptic properties of the product (e.g. taste, smell, etc).
- The “use by date” is found on highly perishable products, judged from a microbiological point of view, which could pose a health risk if not eaten during a certain period. These products, ready-to-eat salads for example, must carry a “use by” date, after which they should not be eaten. In addition, the manufacturer should explain how the product should be stored to keep it fresh for as long as possible, for example at or below a certain temperature.

You should always pay particular attention to the date instructions in order to minimise the risk of food poisoning, and you should not eat or cook foods about which you are unsure.

In addition to general food labelling rules, there are certain specific requirements, which relate either to particular product types or processes, or to particular aspects of a product. Alcoholic drinks must carry a label indicating how much alcohol they contain by volume. The use of gases to package a product must be mentioned.

Further information

1. [EU Directive 2000/13/EC relating to the labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuffs.](#)
2. [Amended by Commission Directive 2001/101/EC.](#)