

It contains exactly what it says on the label!

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In today's fast-paced world, we are busier than ever, requiring quick, easy meal and snack solutions to eat in the home or on the go, but the food choices should not be at the expense of our health. Labelling the nutritional content of food has become important not simply because the consumer has a right to know what is in the food but also to help us make proper dietary choices so we can follow a healthy, well-balanced diet.

Food manufacturers list and quantify the nutrients contained in food products so that we can keep track of what we are eating and the quantity. The food label is of increasing interest to consumers as an information tool because a balanced diet is the most effective means of ensuring good health and well-being, in addition to taking regular physical exercise.

Voluntary vs mandatory – what does the law say?

Current EU legislation¹ allows for voluntary nutrition labelling, with one exception. It is compulsory to list the nutrients in a food if any “nutrition claims” are made – that is to say, if any representation or advertising about that food deliberately states or implies that it has particular nutritional properties. Such claims must be clarified on the label with more detailed information. The information can often be found in a table printed on the label or, where there is insufficient space, in linear form.

If food manufacturers or retailers choose to label nutrients voluntarily, they must follow certain rules for doing so. There are two formats allowed. Both must give the energy content of the food or drink at the top of the list. One format gives in addition the amount of protein, carbohydrate and fat in the food (known as the “Big 4”). The second format - also called the “Big 8” - lists energy, protein, carbohydrate and fat but goes on to add saturated fat, fibre and sodium too. In both cases, the labels may also list quantities of sugar, starch, polyols, mono-unsaturated fatty acids, polyunsaturated fatty acids and cholesterol or any of the recognised minerals or vitamins, should the manufacturers choose to provide this information.

Specificities on nutrients and energy

A few other conditions apply, however, in some cases.

If a specific claim is made about sugars, saturated fats, fibre or sodium, then the food product must use the second format (the energy value plus the seven nutrients) including the amount of the nutrient for which the claim is made.

If the amount of sugar, starch or polyols in a food is given, this must be shown on the label after the amount of carbohydrates to indicate what amounts sugars, polyols and starch make up the carbohydrate. Where the amount or type of fatty acid or cholesterol is provided, this must immediately follow the

amount of total fats.

If polyunsaturated fatty acids and/or mono-unsaturated fatty acids and/or cholesterol is/are specified on the label, then the amount of saturated fat must also be mentioned.

The energy value and the amount of nutrients must be labelled in the following units:

- for energy in kilocalories (kcal) and kilojoules (kJ);
- for protein, carbohydrates, fat, fibre and sodium in grams (g); and for cholesterol in milligrams (mg).

This information is to be expressed per 100g or 100 ml or in some cases per serving/portion. Information on vitamins and minerals must, in addition, be expressed as a percentage of the “recommended daily allowance” (RDA) for those micronutrients.

What about consumer’s knowledge?

Survey’s have shown that consumers do not read food labels and nutrition information is not used to improve food choices. Difficulties in understanding the information on a label and the way it is presented, have lead the European Commission to start a revision of the nutrition labelling directive.

Labelling is just one way of providing consumers with appropriate information and much more could be done to help consumers make informed and healthy choices. It is argued that the best use of the label is to provide clear, simple and user friendly information and this should be supported, reinforced and extended by a comprehensive nutrition education programme involving consumer groups, the food industry, governments educators and health professionals.

Reference

Directive 90/496/EEC on nutrition labelling for food.

Example of Nutrition labelling Lentil soup	
Typical value	Per 100 ml
Energy	375 kJ (89 kcal)
Protein	5,6 g
Carbohydrate of which sugar	9,5 g 1,2 g
Fat of which saturated	3,2 g 1,3 g
Fibres	2,5 g

Sodium	0,56 g
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