

# Top Tips and Activities! Understanding Food Labels



Food labels can be confusing. The symbols, names and numbers may be unfamiliar to most, but with a little background knowledge, the healthy choice soon becomes apparent!

## The traffic light system

The aim of this type of labeling is to provide important information to the consumer simply and quickly. Although the traffic light labels are not compulsory, a growing number of manufacturers are using them on their products in an attempt to present relevant information in a straightforward manner.

Typically, the labels show the levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt in the product using the colours red, green and amber to portray the amount contained in the food and therefore how often the product should be consumed. For example, a food which shows a **red** label for saturated fat is high in that particular nutrient and therefore should be eaten in moderation. Those with an **amber** label indicate that the food contains moderate levels of the indicated nutrient and can be consumed most of the time. **Green** means that the food is low in the relevant nutrient and is considered to be a healthy choice. As well as the traffic light colours, the label also provides the size of a typical serving of the product, making the consumer more aware of how much they should be eating!

## The ingredient list

The ingredient list must contain everything that is present in the final product. The list must also be in descending order, meaning that the higher up the ingredient on the list, the more the product contains. The list also provides information about the presence of any additives, either by name or E number and their uses, for example colourings and preservatives. Manufacturers also use alternative names for ingredients which can sometimes complicate the matter! For example, sugar could be listed under a number of names including; glucose, dextrose, sucrose or invert sugar. If in doubt, consult the nutrition panel which provides information about the levels of nutrients such as saturated and unsaturated fat, carbohydrates, salt and sugars. The amount of main ingredient included in the product must be given as a percentage of the final product, for example the label on fruit yoghurt must inform the customer what percentage of the yoghurt is fruit.

## Claims

For a food to be advertised as 'low fat' or 'low calorie' it must contain less than a certain amount of the particular substance. The table below summarises these values.

	kcal per 100g	kcal per 100ml
Low calorie	40	20
Low fat	3	1.5
Low sugar	5	2.5
Low salt/sodium	0.3/0.12	0.3/0.12

There are strict rules concerning health claims associated with the consumption of a certain food. The claim must be supported by clear scientific evidence and must be approved before it can be advertised as a benefit of a particular food. Only certain claims such as 'can help lower cholesterol' or 'helps maintain a healthy heart' can be used.



## E numbers

Substances which are added to food to improve the quality of the product in terms of shelf life, colour, texture or flavour are often listed as E numbers, which can create confusion! Below are some common additives, their E numbers and their purposes:

Name	E number	Type of additive	Purpose	Common sources
Vitamin C/ascorbic acid	E300	Antioxidant	Prolong shelf life	Foods containing fat/oil
Sulphur dioxide	E220	Preservative	Prolong shelf life	Foods with a long shelf life
Nitrates and nitrites	E249 - E252			
Caramel	E150a	Colouring	Replace natural colours	Any processed food
Curcumin	E100			
Sunset yellow	E110			
Quinoline yellow	E104			
Carmoisine	E122			
Allura red	E129			
Tartrazine	E102			
Ponceau 4R	E124			
Lecithins	E322	Emulsifier	Helps ingredients to combine	A wide range of foods
Locust bean gum	E410	Stabiliser	Stops ingredients separating	A wide range of foods
Pectin	E440	Gelling agent	Modify the consistency of food	Jams and jellies
MSG	E621	Flavour enhancer	Adds to the flavour of a food	Soup, sauces and meat products
Aspartame	E951	Sweeteners	Replace sugars	Fizzy drinks, yoghurt and chewing gum
Saccharin	E954			
Acesulfame-K	E950			
Sorbitol	E420			