Food labels and how to use them

food

your health -
your choice

West Yorkshire Trading Standards Service

North Kirklees Primary Care Trust NHS

food labels

and **how to use them**

There's a lot of information on food labels and it can be confusing, so you need to pick out what is important to you, so that you can make the choice which suits you best.

Always remember, labels are there to help sell the product as well as to provide information. You may have to look carefully to get the full picture.

What is the food made of?

Obvious? Not always, but you should be able to find the answer by looking at the **name of the food** along with the **list of ingredients.**

The 'legal' name of the food is sometimes not even on the front of the pack but once you find it you have a much better idea of what the product is

– don't just find the marketing or 'fancy' name, find the true description.

e.g. **Chicken Nuggets** – might be '*chopped and shaped chicken with textured soya protein, wheat starch and added water in breadcrumb coating*'.

The ingredients list gives you a breakdown of what is in the food. The first thing on the list is the largest/heaviest ingredient followed by the next largest/heaviest and so on down to the smallest/lightest.

e.g. **Blackcurrant Juice Drink** – *Ingredients: water, glucose syrup, blackcurrant juice from concentrate (6%), sucrose, citric acid, vitamin C.*

So there is mainly water in this fruit drink and only 6% fruit juice.

However, a product labelled '*fruit juice*' must be 100% fruit juice. Adding the word '*drink*' makes a big difference.

When you read the ingredients list, the most important ingredients should be given as a percentage so you can see how much of them are in the food and you can compare similar products.

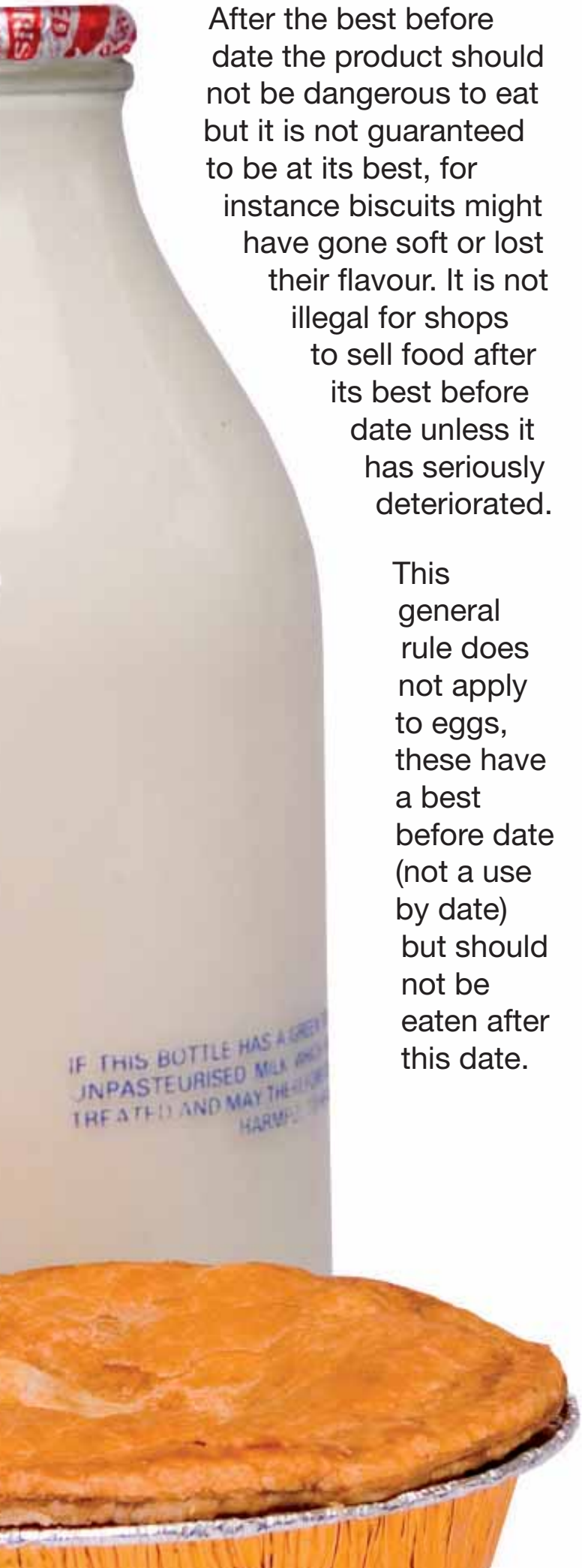
How long will the food last?

Almost all packed foods are marked with a date which is either a **use by** date or a **best before** date.

The most important one to look for is the **use by** date. This is used on foods that go off quickly such as milk, chilled ready meals, meat pies etc.

You should not use food or drink after the end of the use by date as it could cause food poisoning. It is illegal for shops to sell foods after their use by dates. Such foods should be kept chilled.

The **best before** date is on products such as biscuits, cans of fizzy drink, breakfast cereals, frozen foods etc.



After the best before date the product should not be dangerous to eat but it is not guaranteed to be at its best, for instance biscuits might have gone soft or lost their flavour. It is not illegal for shops to sell food after its best before date unless it has seriously deteriorated.

This general rule does not apply to eggs, these have a best before date (not a use by date) but should not be eaten after this date.

How can I make a healthy choice?

A healthy and varied diet is important for good health. The Government's key recommendations for healthy eating are to eat more fruit and vegetables and dietary fibre and less salt, sugar and fats, particularly saturated fats.

Many labels give **nutritional information** that can help you make a healthy choice. This will be in the form of a table.

You should be interested in the level of calories, sugar, fat, fibre or salt in a product ('Calories' are given as 'kcal' in the table).

The labels tell you how much of these are in 100g or 100ml of the food. Some tell you how much in a serving as well. Some labels only tell you about carbohydrate and not sugar and some don't include salt.

It would be easier if all labels were the same but at the moment they are not!

e.g. **Hot & Spicy Meat Pizza**

Typical Values	Per 100g
Energy	1080kj 257kcal
Protein	11.9g
Carbohydrate Of which sugars	27.9g 2.5g
Fat Of which saturates	10.9g 4.0g
Fibre	2.1g
Sodium	0.7g

Note that **salt** is shown as **sodium** in the table. To work out how much salt this is, multiply the amount of sodium by **2.5**. Some labels do this for you.

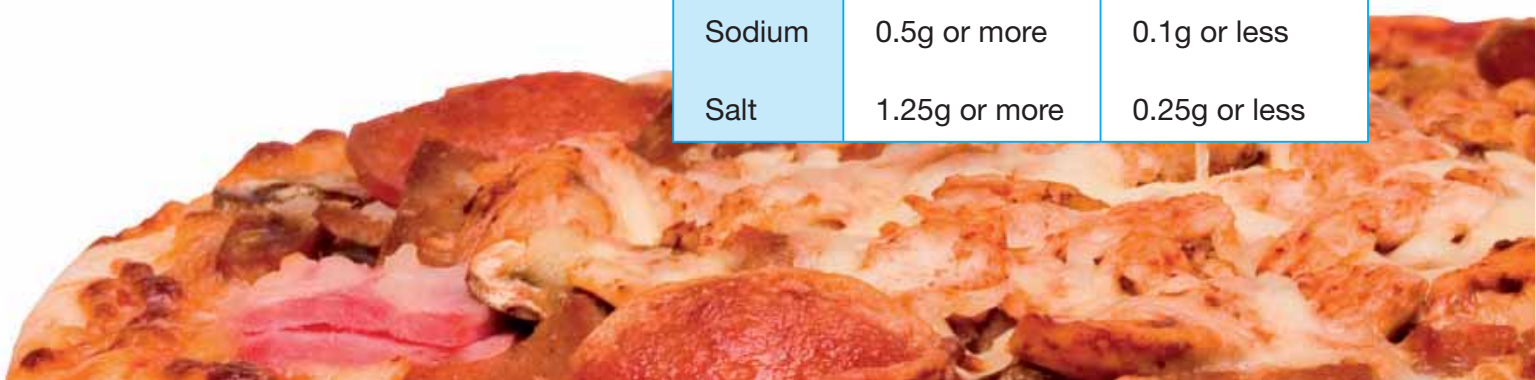
In the example, the pizza actually contains 1.75g of salt per 100g. That is a lot.
You can use the nutritional information to compare one product with another.

Don't forget the size of the product also makes a difference. Most foods are marked with a weight or volume so you can work out how many calories, fat etc, you will get in a pack.

How do you know what is a little and what is a lot when it comes to fat, sugar and salt?

If you are on a strict diet you could take your calculator shopping, if not you can follow the Food Standards Agency's quick and easy guidelines below.

	This is a lot per 100g	This is a little per 100g
Sugar	10g or more	2g or less
Fat	20g or more 5g saturates or more	3g or less 1g of saturates or less
Sodium Salt	0.5g or more 1.25g or more	0.1g or less 0.25g or less



Some labels tell you in the nutritional table whether they contain a high, medium or low level of the nutrients so that you don't have to remember the figures.

How much fat, calories and salt should we be eating?

Again there are guidelines for average adults of normal weight.

Each Day	Women	Men
Calories	2000	2500
Fat	70g	95g
Sodium	2.4g	2.4g
Salt	6g	6g

You can carry our handy credit-card size guide to help you buy the healthiest products.

The nutritional table can also make sense of the **claims** made on lots of products.

Low fat, reduced fat, 98% fat free, no added sugar, low salt etc – what do these mean and which is best for a healthy diet?

Although none of these claims should be misleading they are not always as straightforward as they appear. Remember, look at the amount per 100g or per 100ml and see if it is 'a little' or 'a lot'.

This is 6g of salt!

Low Fat – this means no more than 3g of fat per 100g or 100ml. It does not necessarily mean low calorie.

For example If you take the fat out of biscuits you have to replace it with something else and this is very often sugar, so you don't necessarily end up with a low calorie biscuit.

No Added Sugar - means just that – it does not mean the product is necessarily low in sugar. Many foods such as fruit have sugar in them naturally.

A 'no added sugar' fruit spread might have just as much sugar in it as a normal jam only the sugar will have come from the fruit and from apple juice instead of from a bag of sugar.

Look for how much sugar it contains per 100g – remember more than 10g per 100g is a lot.

Reduced Fat – means that the product should have at least 25% less fat than the 'standard' version of the same thing. Again it does not mean it is necessarily low in fat – just that it is less than the regular variety.

For instance, a reduced fat chocolate mousse may still have more than 20g per 100g of fat (a lot) but have less than the regular chocolate mousse.

X% Fat Free - be wary of such claims which can give a misleading impression, for example '*80% Fat Free'* actually means that with a 20% fat content it contains 'a lot' of fat under the guidelines.

Low Salt - means no more than 5mg (0.005g) of sodium, that is 12.5 mg (0.0125g) of salt per 100g or 100ml. This may be listed as 'trace' in the nutrition table.

What if I have a food allergy?

There are twelve main allergens which might be found in food and if they are included as an ingredient then the label must have a clear reference to those allergens. This reference is often in a separate panel, but it does not have to be, so also look closely at the ingredients list.

The twelve allergens are:

- cereals with gluten
- crustaceans
- eggs
- fish
- peanuts
- other nuts
- soybeans
- milk
- celery
- mustard
- sesame seeds
- sulphur dioxide

Remember

Labels are there to sell the product and provide information.

The manufacturers are going to want to make sure you see the best things about the product.

But find:

- the legal name
- the ingredients list
- the date mark
- the nutritional information
- the allergen information

and you can then make an informed choice!

For further information contact:

Consumer Direct
08454 04 05 06

Food Standards Agency web sites:

www.foodstandards.gov.uk
www.eatwell.gov.uk

Neighbourhood Renewal
CHANGING COMMUNITIES, CHANGING LIVES IN KIRKLEES

Published by West Yorkshire Trading Standards Service, October 2005
Acknowledgement for contents to Hampshire County Council
Printed by Yes Print, Batley