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[Canada.ca](#) > [Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#) > [Food labels](#) > [Labelling](#)

> [Consumers](#)

# Understanding a food label

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## Important notice

The information on this web page is being updated to reflect changes to labelling information, which include nutritional information, list of ingredients, and food colour requirements due to amendments to the *Food and Drug Regulations* (FDR) and the implementation of the *Safe Food for Canadians Regulations*.

The new FDR requirements are available in the [Industry Labelling Tool](#). Food businesses have a transition period to meet them, during which they must comply with either the former or the new requirements.

View our detailed explanation on how to read a food label

- [Flash version - Understanding a Food Label](#)
- [Mobile version - Understanding a Food Label](#)

## Food Labelling in Canada

The food label is one of the most important tools Canadian consumers can use to make informed choices about healthy and safe foods. To ensure consumers have reliable and trustworthy information, there are federal regulations and requirements for food labels. Companies that produce and sell food products are responsible for making sure their labels meet these

requirements. Certain labelling requirements are mandatory on almost all food products. For example, the majority of food products require a list of ingredients. Other labelling requirements are only mandatory if companies choose to make a certain claim. For example, products that include health claims must meet strict standards. However, regardless of the type of food labelling information, all food labels must be truthful and not misleading to consumers.



## How to read a food label

Today's food labels contain a lot of information, which can make them confusing. Sometimes, companies use labels to make products stand out using claims and photos, but these can distract consumers from other relevant parts of the label. When you are making a decision about food products, the first thing you should do is understand what is in the particular product, and to do that we need to remove some of the excess noise. Certain elements of food labels are mandatory on most packaged food products and must follow specific rules. These key labelling elements are: the Nutrition Facts Table, list of ingredients, allergen statements - especially if you or someone you know has food allergies - and date marking information, such as best before dates.

### ▼ Nutrition Facts Table

#### **What do you need to know?**

The Nutrition Facts Table is mandatory on most packaged food products with some exceptions, such as non-ground raw meat, poultry and seafood, alcoholic beverages and some products that contain very few nutrients, including coffee and spices.



The Nutrition Facts Table provides information on the serving size, calories and 13 core nutrients, such as fat, sodium and sugar.

It also provides % Daily Value, which helps you determine if the food product contains a little or a lot of a certain nutrient. In general, 5% or less is considered a little and 15% or more is considered a lot. When comparing two products, you can use the % Daily Value to see which product has more or less of a certain nutrient.

% Daily Value for nutrients is based on the highest recommended intakes for people more than two years of age (not including pregnant women) as set by Health Canada.

**You can use this information to:** determine a food's nutritional value and compare it to other products to make healthy food choices.

### **Where do you find it?**

The Nutrition Facts Table must be displayed on a blank surface where information can easily be seen and read by consumers. Due to its strict size requirements, it is commonly found on the back or side of a food product.

The Nutrition Facts Table must appear in English and French.

### **What rules must it follow?**

The Nutrition Facts Table must list the 13 core nutrients: fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, fibre, sugar, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron. A simplified version of the Nutrition Facts Table may be used if the product does not contain certain nutrients.

The % Daily Value is required for all nutrients, except for cholesterol, sugars and protein. Protein does not have a % Daily Value since most Canadians get enough in their diet. Sugars and cholesterol do not have a % Daily Value since there is no recommended amount for a healthy population.

Companies can also voluntarily provide information on other nutrients, such as folate, potassium, riboflavin and other vitamins and minerals.

### ▼ List of Ingredients



#### **Ingredients:**

Organic skim milk, organic cream, bacterial cultures.

#### **Ingrédients:**

Lait écrémé biologique, crème biologique, cultures bactériennes.

### **What do you need to know?**

The list of ingredients is required on most packaged food products with more than one ingredient. The list of ingredients shows all of the ingredients in packaged food products, including their components

(the ingredients of ingredients). Ingredients are listed in order of weight, with the main ingredient first.

However, it is important to remember that two products with identical lists of ingredients may not provide the same nutrition. For example, two granola bars might have the same list of ingredients, but one granola bar could have twice the sugar or half the fibre. To make a comparison, consumers can look at the Nutrition Facts Table.

**You can use this information to:** figure out what ingredients primarily make up your food products. If you are trying to buy or avoid certain ingredients, this is the place to look.

### **Where do you find it?**

The ingredient list may be shown anywhere on the package, except the bottom, and must be shown in both English and French.

The list of ingredients is commonly found near the Nutrition Facts Table, which can make it easier for consumers to compare the ingredients and nutrition information.

### **What rules must it follow?**

To help consumers make healthy and safe food choices, ingredients and their components (the ingredients of ingredients) must be declared by their common names in the list of ingredients on a food label. Component ingredients are usually listed in brackets following ingredient. For example a loaf of bread may have the following list of ingredients: Enriched flour (wheat, flour, niacin, riboflavin, folic acid).

Common names are the names of the ingredient that is regulated by law or used commonly by consumers. For example, to help consumers identify products that have partially hydrogenated oil or fats (a source

of trans fats), the word "hydrogenated" must be used, such as hydrogenated soybean oil or hydrogenated vegetable oil.

### ▼ Allergen Declarations and Gluten Sources



#### **Ingredients:**

Organic skim milk, organic cream, bacterial cultures.

#### **Contains:** milk

#### **Ingrédients:**

Lait écrémé biologique, crème biologique, cultures bactériennes.

#### **Contient:** du lait

### **What do you need to know?**

If you or someone in your family has a food allergy, it is essential to check for food allergens on the product label. Companies can sometimes change ingredients, so it's important to check labels each time products are purchased.

There are 10 priority food allergens that account for the majority of all food allergies. They are set by Health Canada and include: peanuts, egg, soy, sesame seeds, milk, seafood, tree nuts, sulphites, wheat and mustard.

Packaged food products that contain priority food allergens and gluten sources must include them in the list of ingredients and/or in a statement that begins with "Contains" on their label. For example, a product with peanuts would include the word "peanuts" in the list of ingredients, or in a statement that states "Contains peanuts," or both.

If you or someone you know has an allergy that is not one of the priority allergens, you will need to read the list of ingredients carefully and contact the company if you are unsure if it contains a certain ingredient.

**You can use this information to:** avoid specific food allergens or sensitivities in food products.

### **Where do you find it?**

Information about allergens in a food product must be available in the list of ingredients and/or immediately following in the "Contains statement." This statement is sometimes in bold to help consumers identify allergens.

The ingredient list and "contains statement" may be shown anywhere on the package, except the bottom, and must be shown in both English and French.

### **What rules must it follow?**

Food allergens or gluten sources must be written in commonly used words, such as "milk" and "wheat." For example, if there is flour in the food product, the company would need to include "wheat" in brackets, or include a statement that reads, "Contains wheat."

Companies may also include a precautionary statement if there is a possibility that a food allergen could be in a food product through cross-contamination. It is recommended that companies identify these possibilities by using "may contain". For example a product that may have been cross-contaminated with peanuts could use a statement that reads, "May contain peanuts".



## ▼ Date Marking



2014/MA/19  
Best before/Meilleur avant



### **What do you need to know?**

There are two types of dates you may find on a food label: expiration dates and best before dates.

An expiration date is mandatory on certain food products, including formulated liquid diets, meal replacements, nutritional supplements and human milk supplements (infant formula). These food products should not be eaten if the expiration date has passed.

The best before dates tell you the anticipated amount of time an unopened food product, when stored properly, will keep its freshness, taste, nutritional value or any other qualities claimed by the company. The best before date does not guarantee product safety. The best before date also does not apply after a product has been opened, as opened food products may go bad long before the best before date.

The best before date must appear on packaged food products that will remain fresh for 90 days or less, such as milk, yogurt or bread.

However, companies can voluntarily include the best before date on products that will keep fresh for longer than 90 days.

**You can use this information to:** determine how long your unopened food product will last and the safety of certain products.



## **Where do you find it?**

The best before date and expiration date may appear anywhere on the package. If the best before date or expiration date is placed on the bottom of the package, it has to be indicated somewhere else on the label that it can be found there.

Best before dates must be identified using the words "best before" and "meilleur avant" grouped together with the date.

## **What rules must it follow?**

There is no standard format for expiration dates; however, the term "Exp" is often used.

The format for the best before date is the year (optional unless it is needed for clarity), followed by the month, then the date.

For example: A product with a best before date of August 22, 2014, would be: Best Before 14 AU (august) 22 Meilleur Avant.

If storage instructions are required for the unopened product to meet its best before date, this must be included. For example, the instructions "keep refrigerated" would be required on certain food products, such as ready-to-eat meats.

Foods packaged at a retail store can indicate the best before date of a product by stating the date the food product was packaged, as well as the number of days following packaging the product will retain its freshness.

### ▼ Country of Origin Claims - Where is it from?

## **What claims are you likely to see?**

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Made in Canada from domestic and imported ingredients / Fabriqué au Canada à partir d'ingrédients canadiens et importés

Nature's Melody Farms, St Georges, ON N1G 4S9

While it is mandatory to include the name and address of the responsible company on the food label, claims about the origin of the food can also appear on the label.

If a food product is imported, it is mandatory to state the country of origin on certain packaged products, such as dairy, fish and seafood, and fresh fruits and vegetables.

Generally, this means the words "Product of [Name the country]" must appear on the label.

A company may also choose to voluntarily make claims about the origin of a food or an ingredient in the food.

For example, a company may choose to label packaged cookies that were made in England and imported into Canada as "Product of England." Similarly, the label for a blueberry pie that is made using Canadian blueberries may say "made with 100% Canadian blueberries."

If company uses a "Product of Canada" or "Made in Canada" claim there are specific guidelines that it must follow.

**What do they mean?**

"Product of Canada" and "Made in Canada" claims have specific guidelines that must be met in order for companies to use the claim.

A "Product of Canada" label means that all, or virtually all (generally 98 per cent), of the food, processing and labour used to make the food is Canadian. This means that these foods were grown or raised by Canadian farmers, and prepared and packaged by Canadian food companies.

The claim "Made in Canada" means that the manufacturing or processing of the food occurred in Canada. A claim can be made on a label if the last substantial step of the product occurred in Canada, regardless if the ingredients are domestic or imported. For example, the processing of cheese, dough, sauce and other ingredients to create a pizza would be considered a substantial step. If the food product contains some food grown by Canadian farmers, it can use the claim "Made in Canada with domestic and imported ingredients." If all of the ingredients have been imported, it can use the claim "Made in Canada from imported ingredients."

All other origin claims such as "Distilled in Canada", "Roasted in the United States", and "Refined in France" that describe the country's value-added may be used as long as they are truthful and not misleading for consumers.

### **What claims cannot be made?**

A company cannot mislead consumers about the origin of a product, even if some of the ingredients came from that country. For example, chocolate chip cookies made with Belgian chocolate cannot be labelled as Belgian cookies unless the product was made in Belgium.

In this case it needs to be clearly identified what ingredients came from that country. For example, the label could read "cookies made with Belgian chocolate."

### ▼ Composition Claims - What is it made of?



### **What claims are you likely to see?**

Composition claims are voluntary claims used by companies to highlight or emphasize an ingredient or flavour in a food product.

This includes claims that highlight a desirable ingredient, such as "Made with 100% fruit juice" or emphasize the fact that certain ingredients were not added or present in the food product, such as "No added preservatives or artificial flavours."

These claims highlight the ingredients that the companies want you to focus on. Check the Nutrition Facts Table and the list of ingredients to get the full list.

### **What do they mean?**

Claims that highlight the presence of a certain ingredient, such as "Made with real fruit" or "Made with whole grains" give consumers some information about the contents of the product, but the claim does not mean that it is made exclusively with that ingredient. For

example, a loaf of bread with the claim "made with whole grains" may only contain a small portion of whole grains and a large portion of enriched flour. In these cases, check the list of ingredients to see if whole grains appear near the top of the list to confirm it is a major ingredient.

Claims that go further and provide a percentage or an amount, such as made with "100% pure orange juice" or "contains more than 95 per cent real fruit" provide consumers with more information about the amount of the highlighted ingredient.

When companies make negative claims about the absence of a particular ingredient or the removal of a substance of the food product, the ingredient or substance must be totally absent in the food product.

### **What claims cannot be made?**

When making claims about the composition of a product, companies are not permitted to overemphasize the presence of an ingredient to make it seem more desirable to consumers. For example, if an ingredient is only present in trace amounts, it should not be highlighted on the package.

Negative claims about ingredients are not permitted if they give the false impression to consumers that this ingredient is in other similar products. For example a company could not include a "no colour added" claim on a hotdog label, because colour is not permitted in any hotdog in Canada. The label could state "No hotdogs in Canada contain added colour."

In addition, some products may include a claim about the lack of a "chemical preservative," or "only natural preservatives" when they include ingredients, such as vegetables with naturally occurring high levels of nitrates which are an approved preservative for certain meat products. These claims must include information about the naturally occurring preservative so that it is clear for consumers.

### ▼ Nutrition Claims - What are the health and nutrition benefits?



### What claims are you likely to see?

There are two types of nutrition claims: nutrient content claims and health claims. These claims, when used, must follow specific rules from Health Canada to make sure they are consistent and not misleading.

A nutrient content claim describes the amount of a nutrient, such as calories, fats and fibre in a food product. For example, "a source of fibre" or "trans fat free" are nutrient content claims.

A health claim describes the potential health effects of a food product if consumed within a healthy diet. For example, "A healthy diet rich in vegetables and fruit may help reduce the risk of some types of cancer" is a health claim.

## **What do they mean?**

Health Canada has a list of nutrient content claims that companies can use on a food label. If you use these food claims when picking a food product, it is important to know what it means. For example:

- "Fat free" means the food must have less than 0.5 grams of fat per serving;
- "Low sodium" means the food must have less than 140 milligrams of sodium per serving;
- "High source of fibre" means the food must have at least 4 grams of fibre per serving.

Health Canada also has an approved list of certain health claims, as well as the criteria the food product needs to meet in order to use the claim. If a company chooses to use a health claim that is not on Health Canada's approved list, the company must have scientific evidence, that it can provide to CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) and Health Canada, to back-up the claim. Some claims may need to be checked by Health Canada before they can go on a label.

Companies can also make general health claims, such as "healthy," "smart" and "nutritious." These claims cannot be misleading, and depending on the claim, some additional criteria may apply. For example, a "nutritious" claim can only be used on a food that contains a source of at least one nutrient from the Nutrition Facts Table.

Since these claims are very general, check the Nutrition Facts Table to decide how healthy or nutritious a food product is.

## **What claims cannot be made?**

Companies cannot make nutrition or health claims unless the label has a Nutrition Facts Table.



In addition, a company cannot make a claim about a nutrient that does not appear in the Nutrition Facts Table. For example, if a company claims a food product is a "good source of Vitamin D," then vitamin D must be included in the Nutrition Facts Table.

Companies are not permitted to alter approved nutrition content and health claims to make them sound more appealing. Claims such as "*ultra* low fat" or "*extra* high protein" are not permitted.

► Method of Production Claims - How is it made?

## Consumers' Role

### How to report mislabelled food

Consumers can play an active role in food labelling in Canada. You can decide what information is important to you, and learn what to look for on labels to make that choice. If you have a question about what a specific claim on a food product means, such as natural or free range claims, you should contact the company directly. If you have a safety concern, such as an unlabelled allergen, or feel that a label is not truthful or is misleading, you can report this to the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) through our website. The CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) follows up on all complaints, but prioritizes complaints related to food safety, such as undeclared allergens on a food label.



In some cases it is easy for the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) to determine if a product is not following the rules. For example, if a product is labelled as "low fat", but does not meet Health Canada's criteria for low fat claims (less than three grams of fat per serving size), the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) would determine this product is mislabelled. Other labelling complaints can be more difficult to assess, such as determining whether an image or logo may mislead a consumer. In these cases CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) labelling specialists would evaluate the label as a whole to assess the overall impression created by the image or logo, and make a decision based on any related guidelines, direction, evaluation tools and previous decisions made by the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) or Health Canada.

If any product is determined to be mislabelled, companies must take action to correct the situation (for example remove the claim or add more information to the label). Depending on the situation the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) will also determine if further enforcement action, such as prosecution, is necessary.

Knowing that food is healthy and safe to eat is fundamentally important to all Canadians and their families. Understanding food labels is one of the steps consumers can take to make informed food choices. The next time you are at the grocery store trying to decide what products to buy, remember the key elements to look for to help ensure you make a good choice.

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