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Reading Food Labels

A practical guide to making better choices when buying packaged foods

Food labels can help you compare packaged foods—but only if you know where to look.

Claims such as “**sugar-free**,” “**no added sugar**,” “**multigrain**” or “**high protein**” can make a product appear healthier than it necessarily is. Instead of relying only on the front of the packet, turn it around and look at the nutrition information and ingredient list.

1. Start With the Serving Size

Before looking at calories, carbohydrates or fat, check:

Serving size | Number of servings in the pack

Nutrition information may be given **per serving or per 100 g/100 mL**, depending on the label.

If a packet contains two servings and you consume the entire packet, your actual intake may be twice the amount listed per serving.

Remember: A manufacturer's serving size is not necessarily the portion that is appropriate for you.

2. Look at Total Carbohydrate — Not Just Sugar

For glucose management, don't look only at the word “**sugar**.”

Total carbohydrate can include:

- Starches
- Sugars
- Fibre

Starches can also raise blood glucose even when a food contains little or no added sugar.

This is why a biscuit, cereal or snack labelled “**no added sugar**” may still contain a substantial amount of carbohydrate.

When comparing similar products, look at the **total carbohydrate for the amount you will actually eat**.

3. Understand Total Sugar and Added Sugar

Total sugar includes sugars naturally present in the food as well as sugars that may have been added.

Added sugar refers to sugars added during processing or preparation.

A product containing “**no added sugar**” is therefore not necessarily:



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Sugar-free | Carbohydrate-free | Calorie-free | Suitable in unlimited quantities

Look at the complete nutrition information rather than one claim on the package.

4. Look for Fibre

Fibre supports digestive and metabolic health and can help improve the overall quality of carbohydrate-containing foods.

Useful sources may include foods containing:

- Whole grains
- Pulses and legumes
- Nuts and seeds
- Other fibre-rich ingredients

When comparing similar packaged products, a higher-fibre option may be preferable—but consider the **whole nutritional profile**, not fibre alone.

5. Check the Protein

Protein is important for satiety, muscle maintenance and overall health.

Check how many grams of protein the product actually provides rather than relying solely on a “**high protein**” claim on the front.

Also consider what comes with that protein. Some products marketed as high-protein foods may simultaneously contain substantial amounts of added sugar, saturated fat, sodium or calories.

6. Look at the Type of Fat

The amount of fat is not the only consideration.

Pay particular attention to:

Saturated fat and trans fat

When comparing similar products, choose options with a more favourable overall fat profile where possible.

Foods such as biscuits, bakery products, desserts, fried snacks and some processed foods can contain significant saturated fat even when they are marketed using other health-related claims.

7. Don't Ignore Sodium

Sodium deserves particular attention if you have:

- High blood pressure
- Cardiovascular risk
- Kidney disease



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- Other conditions requiring sodium restriction

Packaged snacks, sauces, soups, ready-to-eat foods, pickles and processed foods can contain considerable sodium even when they do not taste particularly salty.

Compare similar products and choose lower-sodium options where appropriate.

8. Read the Ingredient List

Ingredients are generally listed in **descending order by weight**.

The first few ingredients can therefore tell you a lot about what makes up most of the product.

Look beyond familiar words such as “healthy,” “natural” or “multigrain” and check what the product actually contains.

Sugar may also appear under different names, including syrups and other sweetening ingredients.

9. Be Careful with Front-of-Pack Claims

“No Added Sugar”

This means sugar has not been added in the manner specified by the claim. It does **not** automatically mean that the food contains no carbohydrate or will have little effect on blood glucose.

“Sugar-Free”

Do not assume that this means calorie-free or carbohydrate-free.

Check the complete nutrition label.

“Multigrain”

The presence of several grains does not automatically mean that the product is predominantly whole grain.

Check the ingredient list.

“High Protein”

Look at the actual grams of protein per serving and the rest of the nutritional profile.

“Low Fat”

Reducing fat does not automatically make a product healthier. Some low-fat products may contain more carbohydrate or added sugar.

“Diabetic-Friendly”

Do not use this claim as your main criterion for choosing a food.

Read the nutrition information just as you would for any other packaged product.

10. Compare Similar Products



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Labels become particularly useful when comparing two versions of the **same type of food**.

For example, when comparing two breakfast cereals, breads or yoghurts, consider:

Serving size → Total carbohydrate → Fibre → Protein → Added sugar → Saturated fat → Sodium

The “better” product depends on your individual health needs, so no single number determines the choice.

A Quick 30-Second Label Check

When you pick up a packaged food, ask:

1. How much am I actually going to eat?

Check the serving size.

2. How much total carbohydrate does that portion contain?

3. How much fibre and protein does it provide?

4. Does it contain significant added sugar, saturated fat or sodium?

5. What are the first few ingredients?

6. Am I choosing it because of the nutrition information—or because of a claim on the front?

Quick Takeaway

Turn the packet around.

Don't judge a food by one number or one marketing claim.

Start with the **serving size**, look at **total carbohydrate rather than sugar alone**, consider fibre and protein, check saturated fat and sodium, and read the ingredient list.

The aim is not to find a “perfect” packaged food. It is to make a **better-informed choice between the options available to you**.

This guide provides general educational information. Individual nutritional requirements may differ according to diabetes treatment, weight goals, kidney or liver disease, pregnancy and other medical conditions.