



How to Read Food Labels Without Being Tricked

Adda Bjarnadottir, MS
Authority Nutrition



Reading labels is a tricky business.

Consumers are more health-conscious than ever, so food manufacturers use misleading tricks to convince people to buy their products.

They often do this even when the food is highly processed and unhealthy.

The regulations behind food labeling are complex, so it's not surprising that the average consumer has a hard time understanding them.

This article briefly explains how to read food labels, and how to sort out the junk from the truly healthy foods.

Don't Be Duped By The Claims on The Front

One of the best tips may be to completely ignore the labels on front of the packaging.

Front labels try to lure you into purchasing products by making health claims. Manufacturers want to make you believe that their product is healthier than other, similar options.

This has actually been studied. Research shows that adding health claims to front labels affects people's choices. It makes them believe a product is healthier than the same product that doesn't list health claims (1, 2, 3, 4).

Manufacturers are often dishonest in the way they use these labels. They tend to use health claims that are misleading, and in some cases downright false.

Examples include many high-sugar breakfast cereals, like "whole grain" Cocoa Puffs. Despite the label, these products are not healthy.

This makes it hard for consumers to choose healthy options without a thorough inspection of the ingredients list.

Bottom Line: Front labels are often used to lure people into buying products. However, most of these labels are highly misleading or downright false.

Look At The Ingredients List

Product ingredients are listed by quantity, from highest to lowest amount.

That means that the first listed ingredient is what the manufacturer used the most of.

A good rule of thumb is to scan the first three ingredients, because they are the largest part of what you're eating.

If the first ingredients include refined grains, some sort of sugar or hydrogenated oils, you can be pretty sure that the product is unhealthy.

Instead, try to choose items that have whole foods listed as the first three ingredients.

Another good rule of thumb is if the ingredients list is longer than 2-3 lines, you can assume that the product is highly processed.

Bottom Line: Ingredients are listed by quantity, from highest to lowest. Try looking for products that list whole foods as the first three ingredients, and be skeptical of foods with long lists of ingredients.

Watch Out For Serving Sizes

The backs of nutrition labels state how many calories and nutrients are in a single serving of the product.

However, these serving sizes are often much smaller portions than people generally eat in one sitting.

For example, one serving may be half a can of soda, a quarter of a cookie, half a chocolate bar or a single biscuit.

In this way, manufacturers try to deceive consumers into thinking that the food has fewer calories and less sugar than it actually does.

Many people are completely unaware of this serving size scheme. They often assume that the entire container is a single serving, while it may actually consist of two, three or more servings.

If you're interested in knowing the nutritional value of what you're eating, you have to multiply the serving given on the back by the number of servings you consumed.

Bottom Line: Serving sizes listed on packaging may be misleading and unrealistic. Manufacturers often list a much smaller amount than most people eat as a single serving.

The Most Misleading Labeling Claims – and What They Actually Mean

Health claims on packaged food are designed to catch your attention and convince you that the product is healthy.

Here are some of the most common ones, and what they actually mean:

- **Light:** Light products are processed to reduce either calories or fat, and some products are simply watered down. Check carefully to see if anything has been added instead, like sugar.
- **Multigrain:** This sounds very healthy, but basically just means that there is more than one type of grain in the product. These are most likely refined grains, unless the product is marked as whole grain.
- **Natural:** This does not necessarily mean that the product resembles anything natural. It simply means that at some point the manufacturer had a natural source (for example, apples or rice) to work with.
- **Organic:** This label says very little about whether the product is healthy or not. For example, organic sugar is still sugar. Only certified organically grown products can be guaranteed to be organic.
- **No added sugar:** Some products are naturally high in sugar. The fact that they don't have added sugar doesn't mean they're healthy. Unhealthy sugar substitutes may also have been added.
- **Low-calorie:** Low-calorie products have to contain 1/3 fewer calories than the *same* brand's original product. However, one brand's low-

calorie version may contain similar calories as the original of another product.

- **Low-fat:** This label almost always means that the fat has been reduced at the cost of adding more sugar. Be very careful and read the ingredients listed on the back.
- **Low-carb:** Recently, low-carb diets have been linked with improved health. However, processed foods that are labeled low-carb are usually just processed junk foods, similar to processed low-fat junk foods.
- **Made with whole grain:** There is probably very little whole grain in the product. Check the ingredients list and see where the whole grain is placed. If it is not in the first 3 ingredients, then the amount is negligible.
- **Fortified or enriched:** This basically means that some nutrients have been added to the product. For example, vitamin D is often added to milk.
- **Gluten-free:** Gluten-free does not equal healthy. It simply means that the product doesn't contain wheat, spelt, rye or barley. Many foods are gluten-free, but can be highly processed and loaded with unhealthy fats and sugar.
- **Fruit-flavored:** Many processed foods have a name that refers to a natural flavor, such as strawberry yogurt. However, there may not be any fruit in the product, only chemicals designed to taste like fruit.
- **Zero trans fat:** "Zero trans fat" actually means "less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving." So if serving sizes are misleadingly small, the product can actually contain a lot of trans fat (5).

All of this being said, there are many truly healthy foods out there that actually *are* organic, whole grain, natural, etc. However, just having these labels does **not** guarantee that the product is healthy.

Bottom Line: There are many words that people link with improved health. These are often used to mislead consumers into thinking that unhealthy processed food is actually good for you.

Different Names for Sugar

Sugar goes by countless names, many of which you may not recognize.



Food manufacturers use this to their advantage. They purposely add many different kinds of sugar to their products so they can hide the actual amount.

By doing this, they can list a “healthier” ingredient at the top, and mention sugar further down. So even though a product may be loaded with sugar, it doesn’t necessarily appear as one of the top 3 ingredients.

To avoid accidentally consuming a lot of sugar, it may be wise to look out for the following names of sugar in ingredient lists:

- **Types of sugar:** beet sugar, brown sugar, buttered sugar, cane sugar, caster sugar, coconut sugar, date sugar, golden

sugar, invert sugar, muscovado sugar, organic raw sugar, raspadura sugar, evaporated cane juice and confectioner's sugar.

- **Types of syrup:** carob syrup, golden syrup, high fructose corn syrup, honey, agave nectar, malt syrup, maple syrup, oat syrup, rice bran syrup and rice syrup.
- **Other added sugars:** barley malt, molasses, cane juice crystals, lactose, corn sweetener, crystalline fructose, dextran, malt powder, ethyl maltol, fructose, fruit juice concentrate, galactose, glucose, disaccharides, maltodextrin and maltose.

There are many more names for sugar, but these are the most common.

If you see any of these in the top spots on the ingredients lists, or several kinds throughout the list, then you can be sure that the product is high in added sugar.

Bottom Line: Sugar goes by many names in ingredient lists, many of which you may not recognize. These include cane sugar, invert sugar, corn sweetener, dextran, molasses, malt syrup, maltose and evaporated cane juice.

Always Choose Whole Foods Whenever Possible

Obviously, the best way to avoid being misled by these labels is to avoid processed foods altogether.

However, if you decide to buy packaged foods, it is necessary to sort out the junk from the higher quality products.

Keep in mind that whole food doesn't need an ingredients list, because the whole food IS the ingredient.

