

FOOD LABELS WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

The principal function of food labelling is to inform consumers of the properties of pre-packed food. The fundamental rule of the labelling of foodstuffs is that consumers should not be misled. Detailed labelling of a product educates consumers as to the exact nature and characteristics of the foodstuff and enables them to make a more informed choice.

1. Name under which the product is sold*

The name of a food must be stated in order to inform the purchaser of the true nature of the product. In addition the use of a brand name, sales name, fancy name or trademark is also permitted.

In certain circumstances, in order to avoid confusion, a description may be required to indicate the true nature of the product and to distinguish it from other foods.

Details of the physical condition of the foodstuff or processes it has undergone must accompany the name of the food.

2. List of ingredients

The list of all the ingredients must be indicated on the label in descending order of weight as recorded during the manufacture of the food. The list must start with a heading that includes the word 'ingredients'.

Certain foods are however, exempt from giving a list of ingredients, such as unprocessed fruit and vegetables and products comprising of a single ingredient where the trade name is the same as the ingredient name (e.g. pepper).

Additives performing technological functions in the final food must be declared in the list of ingredients such that the name of the category of additive is followed by the specific name of the additive or it's E number e.g. Preservative: Sulphur Dioxide or Preservative: E 220.

Note: There are rules for the listing of specific ingredients, such as starch and meat. Where the ingredient 'starch' (or modified starch) originates from a source that contains gluten, the source of its cereal origin must always be given in the list of ingredients e.g. wheat starch. Products containing meat as an ingredient, such as ready meals, must declare the term '...meat' in the list of ingredients preceded by either the animal species or the generic name from which the meat is derived, such as 'bovine meat' or 'beef meat'.

3. The quantity of certain ingredients

In certain circumstances it is necessary to state on the label the quantity of an ingredient which is used in the manufacture or preparation of a foodstuff. The quantity must be declared in percentage terms and should appear in or next to the name of the food or be in the list of ingredients. This is known as quantitative ingredient declaration or QUID. For example, the quantity of an ingredient as a percentage must be declared on the label where:

- the ingredient is included in the name of the food
- the ingredient is associated with the name of the food
- the ingredient is emphasised in words, pictures or graphics (this usually does not apply to serving suggestions)

4. Net quantity*

All pre-packed foodstuffs must be labelled with information on the net quantity of the foodstuff, i.e. its weight or volume, which does not include the packaging material. The net quantity must be expressed using the metric system. The 'e-mark' is not a requirement under food safety legislation. It is regulated according to the Packaged Goods (Quantity Control) rules enforced by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

5. Date of minimum durability*

The date of minimum durability of a foodstuff is the date until which a foodstuff retains its specific properties when properly stored i.e. midnight on the date shown. Most foods must be date marked. There are two types of date markings, a 'best before' and a 'use by' date. A 'best before' date is required for non perishable foods that have a long shelf life such as dried or canned products. A 'use by' date should be applied to foods which are highly perishable. Generally foods that require refrigeration to maintain their safety rather than their quality and that have a relatively short shelf life after manufacture would require a 'use by' date.

6. Special storage instructions or conditions of use

The label should outline any special storage conditions to enable the consumer to maintain the quality of the product, e.g. 'refrigerate after opening', 'store in a cool dry place'. Other options for the storage of the food can also be detailed in order to maintain the specific properties of the opened food such as, 'suitable for freezing' and the inclusion of a star marking panel.



7. Name and address

The label must contain the name or business name and address of the manufacturer or packager inside or outside the EU, or the name or business name and address of the seller within the EU. The contact details must be precise enough to enable a complainant to contact the named agent where necessary. A website address alone is not acceptable.

8. Origin

The origin of a product must be declared only where its absence might mislead the consumer to a material degree as to the true origin of the foodstuff. Consumers could be misled through pictorial representations, such as a flag or a map of a country other than the one in which it was produced, or where the name given to a food or its brand name includes a reference to a place that could imply that the food comes from or has been made in a particular area.

9. Instructions for use

The label must contain instructions on how to use the product if it is necessary so the consumer can make appropriate use of the food, such as cooking, reheating or preparation instructions or declarations such as 'not suitable' for a particular purpose.

10. Alcoholic beverages*

The labelling of alcoholic beverages containing more than 1.2% by volume of alcohol must indicate the actual alcoholic strength by volume.

11. Nutrition Labelling

Nutrition labelling enables consumers to make more informed choices with regard to the nutritional characteristics of the food. It is compulsory where a nutritional claim is made on the label. However, if a label carries nutrition labelling voluntarily, it must comply with Regulations. No nutritional claim can be made on the labelling of a food other than those relating to: • The energy value • The nutrients: protein, carbohydrate, fat, fibre, sodium and substances that belong to or which are components of these nutrients and • Certain vitamins and minerals present in significant amounts.

* Field of Vision: The name of the foodstuff, the date of minimum durability and the net quantity must appear on the label "in the same field of vision". If the product is an alcoholic beverage greater than 1.2% alcohol by volume, its actual alcoholic strength by volume must also appear in this field of vision. The intention is that all the information can easily be seen at the same time under normal purchasing conditions.