How to Read Food labels: What's on a label?

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In Belgium, about 60% of shoppers claim to check the nutritional value stated of food products before they buy them. Mainly, they'll look at the food labels for the number of calories a product contains.
But how many shoppers actually *understand* what the numbers on food labels mean?
When going to the supermarket to buy food, it's easy to be misled by product manufacturers.
When buying guacamole for example, do you only check the number of calories or did you also notice there's only 0.7% of real avocado in your dip sauce?
Have you ever stopped to think what will become of the food industry now that pre-packed smoothies contain more sugar than a soda drink?

If you're already looking beyond the marketing talk: great job! It's good to look at food labels, but it's even better to do it with a critical eye, too.
To make reading food labels go smoother, here are some basic tips to interpret food labels the right way so you can make better judgements about your food consumption.

1. Always look at the 100g servings column

Food manufacturers always have to mention the nutritional content of a product on its packaging. This is represented in the "food label". But just like any table with numbers, you can mold it any way you like. Just so that it looks good enough for you, the consumer, to buy it.
Food producers usually (if not always) want you to think that their products contain fewer calories and less sugar than they actually do. People's sugar radars are generally well enough developed to recognize sugar bombs from afar!
That's why manufacturers will use terms like "serving size" in the food label, which refers to the portion that is "usually" eaten at one time. For instance, this cookie box on the right gives you the details for 1 biscuit.
Eating 1 biscuit doesn't seem all that bad, does it?
But seriously, will you really be able to eat just 1 biscuit?
Especially when you know that inside the box the cookies are packed in portions of three?
In reality, serving sizes mentioned on food labels are (a lot) smaller than the portions people actually eat or drink.
In short, it's better to look at the quantities per 100g.

2. Look for products high on whole food ingredients in food labels

Below the food label is usually where you find the ingredient list. You might be shocked to find out what is used to make your favorite food or beverage!
You might see a lot of nutrients you would rather not consume so much of, such as saturated fats (eg. shortening), trans fat (eg. partially hydrogenated oils) or added sugars (eg. syrups).
What you *do* want to find are *whole foods*. Think: whole fruits, whole veggies and whole grains (like oats).

Next: look at the order of the ingredients. The nutrient which is most present will be listed at the top and the ones in lowest quantity are listed last.

It's key to look for whole foods at the top of the ingredient list!

You probably want to steer clear or be skeptical of foods with very long lists of ingredients and/or E-numbers. More on that in the next section!

3. E-numbers are not as bad as you might think!

There is a widespread suspicion towards E-numbers these days.
The reason? There are ingredients used as food coloring, stabilizers and preservatives which can have harmful effects on your health.
E-numbers are given to food additives, which can be any substances

- that are not normally consumed as a food in itself
- but which are intentionally added to food for technological purposes during manufacturing, processing, preparing, treating, packaging, transporting and/or storing the food to achieve the end product you find in the store
- and that may or may not have any nutritional value as such.

However, not all E-numbers (or additives) are bad for you! Even more so,

each substance that has been given an E-number has been carefully considered and approved for use.

To make sure you can put our tips to use, here are 5 E-numbers you should be avoiding because they can cause side effects:

1. *E621 of MSG:* a flavor enhancer that's used to make food taste better.
   Potential side effects: headaches, nausea, muscle pain…
2. *E951 or aspartame:* an artificial sweetener used in desserts, low-fat foods, low-sugar drinks, snacks and sweets.
   Can cause headaches, and people suffering from PKU are advised to avoid this ingredient completely.
3. *E211 or sodium benzoate:* a food preservative found in margarine, salad dressing, soy sauce, sweets and soft drinks.
   Potential side effects: hyperactivity in children, allergic reactions, asthma.
4. *E133 or brilliant blue FCF*: blue food coloring.
   Potential side effects: allergic reactions. This E-number has already been banned in several European countries.
5. *E213 or calcium benzoate*: a preservative used to elongate the shelf-life of (low-sugar) food and beverages.
   Potential side effects: allergic reactions.

4. How to interpret “shelf life”?

Have you noticed that some products say “expiration date” or “use by” or “best before”?

Interpreting these terms correctly is key to avoid food waste while safely consuming food products.

The “expiration date” and “use by” date tell consumers the last date a product is safe to consume. It’s used on perishable goods such as fresh fish and meat. Eating the food or beverage after the given date will be at your own risk!
The “best before” date lets you know that the product is no longer in its original perfect shape after the given date. It may lose its freshness, taste, aroma or nutrients.
Contrarily to the expiration date, the best before date is merely an indicator. So, it’s perfectly safe to consume products a relatively short time after the given date.

5. Use the Nutrition Facts Label to make healthy choices

The Nutrition Facts Label can be a great guide to making healthy choices if you know what to look out for! Here are some tricks of the trade used by food manufacturers to, for example, make it seem like there is less sugar in the product than is actually the case.
A common way to do this is to give sugar up to 50 different names. Confusing, right?
Syrup, for example, is frequently used in food products and is an ingredient high on 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 types of added sugar: 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.
Keep in mind that fruit also contains natural sugars. They may be healthier than added sugars, but should still not be over-consumed. In the end, sugar is still sugar 🙂