



Reading labels 101

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I don't know about you but before I learnt how to read labels I would stand in the shop with one product in each hand trying to decipher the tiny letters and numbers written on the back or side. Food labels can sometimes be misleading with health claims, flashy packaging or confusing messages leaving you very confused as to if it's classified as a healthy option. On the other hand, food labels can provide you with a great deal of information about that product and once you know how to read them you will feel so empowered.

Key points to look at:

- **Ingredients list**
- **Typical Nutritional Information**
- **Energy**
- **Carbs**
- **Fat**
- **Salt**

There are a few things you should look for on a food label, the first is the **Ingredients list**. This gives you an idea of what is in the product. The first few ingredients listed makes up the largest portion of the food. Therefore if you look at our FUTURELIFE® HIGH ENERGY Smart Food you will see the first ingredient is Smart Maize™ Whole maize flour. Be wary of products where one of the first ingredients listed is sugar or something different to what the product is saying it is.

Now we go to the actual table, this is known as the **Typical Nutritional Information**. This is where the quantities of nutrients found in that food are listed and often where people start to get confused. The nutritional information is usually listed in 2 columns; the first is the quantities of nutrients per 100g or per 100ml (liquid) as well as per serving size, this is usually stipulated by manufacturers. Some products might only have the nutritional value listed per 100 g (or 100 ml) and not per serving size. This is when it can get tricky; you will have to determine the nutritional value by calculating it according to the weight of the product. For example if you are looking at one of our FUTURELIFE® High Protein Smartbars, which weighs

50g, to work out the nutritional per serving you will have to divide the per 100g value in half. At FUTURELIFE® we have made it simple for you, all our products are listed per 100g (or per 100ml) as well as per serving. Most products that are sold in South Africa contain both per 100 g and serving information and those who don't will be obliged to as part of the new labelling laws.

The first nutrient listed is **Energy** and in South Africa it is usually listed in kilojoules (kJ). However in certain products, usually from overseas, energy is also listed in calories (cal) or even kilocalories (kcal), this can become quite confusing. The abbreviations 'cal' and 'kCal' actually have different scientific meanings but food manufacturers often use them interchangeably, therefore 70kCal or 70cal is the same and represents 70 calories. If you come across a product that is in calories, it can be converted to kJ using this easy calculation. 1 kJ is equal to 4.2kCal, therefore 500kJ converted to calories is 119 calories (500 kJ / 4.2) and to go from calories to kJ you multiply by 4.2 (119 kCal / cal x 4.2 = 500 kJ). Now that we have an energy value what does it mean? Energy values for meals should be around 300kCal /1260 kJ to 500 kCal / 2100 kJ calories depending on your gender, exercise level and health goals.

The next nutrient to look at is **Carbohydrates** and it is listed in the label as 'Glycaemic carbohydrate'. This is the total carbohydrates that your body uses for energy and includes sugar. The total sugar value listed under glycaemic carbohydrate is added sugar (sucrose) as well as naturally occurring sugars in the form of lactose (milk sugar) and fructose (fruit sugar) etc. There are numerous names for sugar such as Sucrose, Agave nectar, Caramel, Coconut sugar, Molasses sugar, Honey and the list goes on. Sugars that occur naturally in foods such as fruits, vegetables, dairy and carbohydrates that are high in fibre are okay. It's the sugars that are removed from their original source and added to foods that you need to be weary of. A small amount of added sugar (less than 10 % of Total Energy or about 6 teaspoons per day) can form part of a healthy balanced lifestyle especially in those who exercise. Sugar is often added to many of our foods such as pasta sauces, condiments, yoghurt, confectionary and drinks etc. therefore the total number of tsp can be reached very quickly. That's not even counting the sugar added to your tea or coffee. An easy way to quantify the sugar content in a food product is to calculate the number of teaspoons keeping in mind that there is 5 g of sugar in 1 tsp. of sugar. Let's do an example; FUTURELIFE® Smart Drink has a total sugar content of 10.4 g (mostly naturally occurring from milk) per 250ml, therefore

**10.4g / 5 g = 2.08 therefore
2 teaspoons of sugar.**

To further classify the sugar content of your food (per 100g or 100ml), you can use the table below

Nutrient (per 100g)	Low (Healthier option)	Moderate (Eat most of the time)	High (Eat occasionally)
Sugar	5 g or less	5.1 - 15g	More than 15 g

You also need to look at the portion size you are eating at one time as well as if you are eating it with other foods rich in fibre and protein, as this will slow digestion and absorption into the body. Any product that contains more than 6g of fibre per 100g is classified as 'high in fibre'.

The next nutrient is another controversial nutrient... **Fat**. The fat content is broken down into total fat, saturated fat, unsaturated fat (monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat) and trans fat. Choose food with labels that show a higher unsaturated fat content rather than saturated or trans fats content. Look out for the words such as 'hydrogenated vegetable oil' in the ingredients list as this is another phrase for trans fat. The total fat and saturated fat content of your food product (per 100g) can be rated according to the table below.

It is important to remember that all fats are still high in energy so they should be eaten sparingly.

Nutrient (per 100g)	Low (Healthier option)	Moderate (Most of the time)	High (Eat occasionally)
Total Fat	3 g or less	3.1 - 20 g	More than 20 g
Saturated fat	1.5 g or less	1.6 - 5 g	More than 5g

Another nutrient to watch out for is **sodium** which is listed on the food label as total sodium. Look on the ingredient list for the words 'salt' or any ingredient that contains the word 'sodium' e.g. MSG, baking soda or baking powder. Other words that describe salty foods are "salted", "smoked" or "cured".

Nutrient (per 100g)	Low (Eat more often)	Moderate (Eat sometimes)	High (Avoid or Limit)
Sodium	120mg or less (300 g Table Salt)	120 - 600 mg	More than 600mg (1.5 g Table salt)

The Heart and stroke foundation of South Africa (HSF) have developed a set of criteria to rate the salt content of a product. It was developed as part of their Salt Watch program to reduce the salt intake of South Africans which has been associated with high blood pressure risk.

Look out for the following accredited logos such as the Heart and Stroke Foundation, GI foundation of South Africa (GIFSA), Five a day, Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSAs) and the Diabetes Association of South Africa. If the products carry any of these logos, they have met stringent guidelines to receive that accreditation and may be trusted.

Now that you have learnt how to read a food label, go to your nearest grocery store or pull out some products in your cupboard and give your new skill some practice. If you have questions chat to your dietician or Woolworths store to see if they offer label tours. For more on our FUTURELIFE® products, visit www.futurelife.co.za.

References:

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