

1.11.4 Food labels—what do they mean? As a consumer, do you know how to decode them?

Source: Food Standards Australia and New Zealand.

**1 Date marking**  
Foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have a 'best before' date. It may still be safe to eat those foods after the best before date, but they may have lost quality and some nutritional value. Those foods that should not be consumed after a certain date for health and safety reasons must have a 'use by' date. Bread can use a 'baked on' date if its shelf life is less than seven days.

**12 Food recall information**  
Considering the number of foods available, recalls of unsafe or unsuitable foods are uncommon. Food labels must have the name and business address in Australia or New Zealand of the manufacturer or importer, as well as the lot identification of the food (or date coding). This makes food recalls more efficient and effective. In Australia each year there are about 70 food recalls, most of which are precautionary.

**11 Country of origin**  
In Australia, packed and some unpackaged foods must state the country where the food was produced. This could just be a label identifying the country where the food was packaged and a statement that the food is made from wholly or partially imported ingredients (where applicable). In New Zealand, country of origin requirements apply only to wines.

**10 Directions for use and storage**  
Where specific storage conditions are required in order for a product to keep until its 'best before' or 'use by' date, manufacturers must include this information on the label. For example, 'this yoghurt should be kept refrigerated at or below 4°C'.

**9 Name or description of food**  
Foods must be labelled with an accurate name or description, for example fruit yoghurt must contain fruit. If it were to contain fruit flavouring rather than real fruit, the label would need to say 'fruit flavoured yoghurt'.

**8 Information for food allergy sufferers**  
Some foods can cause severe allergic reactions. These foods include various nuts, shellfish, fanned fish, milk, eggs, sesame and soybeans and their products. These ingredients must be declared on the label. Foods containing sulphite preservatives must be labelled if they have 10 mg per kilogram or more in their product, as it may trigger asthma attacks.

**2 Percentage labelling**  
Packaged foods have to carry labels which show the percentage of the key ingredients in the food product, enabling you to compare the food's components. The characteristic ingredient for this fruit salad yoghurt is fruit, which comprises banana 8%, strawberry 8%, grape 4% and peach 2%. Some foods such as cheese have no characteristic ingredients.

**3 Ingredient list**  
You will usually find the ingredient list on the back of the product. Ingredients must be listed in descending order (by ingoing weight). So if fat, sugar or salt are listed near the start of the list, the product contains a greater proportion of these ingredients.

**4 Food additives**  
Food additives have many different purposes, including making processed food easier to use or ensuring food is preserved safely. All food additives must have a specific use, must be assessed and approved by FSANZ for safety, and must be used in the lowest possible quantity that will achieve their purpose. Food additives must be identified, usually by a number, and included in the ingredients list.

**5 Nutrition information panel**  
Most packaged foods must have a nutrition information panel, showing the amount per serve and per 100 g (or 100 ml if liquid). There are a few exceptions:  
• very small packages, about the size of a larger chewing gum packet  
• foods with no significant nutritional value (such as a single spice, tea, and coffee)  
• foods sold unpackaged (unless a nutrition claim is made)  
• foods made and packed at the point of sale, e.g. bread from a local bakery.

**6 Legibility requirements**  
Any labelling requirement in the Food Standards Code must be legible, prominent, distinct from the background and in English. The size of the type in warning statements must be at least 3 mm high.

**7 Labels must tell the truth**  
Suppliers must label food products with accurate weights and measures information, which are regulated by Australian State and Territory and New Zealand Government Fair Trading agencies. Fair trading laws and food laws in both countries require that labels do not misinform through false or misleading representations. For example, a food with a picture of strawberries on the label must contain strawberries.



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