



NUTRITION NOTES

WHAT'S IN A FOOD LABEL?

By Debra McLennan, RD, APG Food and Nutrition Coordinator

Did you know that nutrition labelling became mandatory on prepackaged foods in Canada in 2007? Food labels and food labelling requirements must comply with the acts and regulations set out by the Government of Canada. These include the Food and Drugs Act (FDA), the Food and Drug Regulations (FDR), the Safe Food for Canadians Act (SFCA) and the Safe Food for Canadians Regulations (SFCR). All food labels must include their information in English and French.

Not all foods require a food label. These include fresh vegetables and fruits; raw meat (except ground), fish, poultry and seafood; foods that contain very few nutrients like spices, coffee and tea; foods that are processed or prepared at the store such as salads, sausages, bakery items; and alcohol. The labels on packaged food products must include a Nutrition Facts Table, list of ingredients, allergen statements, and date markings.

Mandatory Information

The **Nutrition Facts Table** provides information to help us learn about the nutrients and calories in a food. This table must include serving size, calories, % Daily Value and 13 core nutrients (see sample table). With the format being consistent across all food products, it allows for easy comparison between different foods.

If there is more than one ingredient in a packaged food, a **list of ingredients** is required. Ingredients are listed by order of weight and the main ingredient is listed first. All the ingredients in the packaged food, along with their components, are found in the list of ingredients. This is useful information when looking to see what the content of the food product is in the event you are looking for a specific ingredient to avoid or that you want in a food.

Allergen Statements are required on a food label when a packaged food contains any of the priority food allergens set by Health Canada. There are 10 priority allergens:

peanuts, egg, soy, wheat, milk, seafood, tree nuts, sesame seeds, sulphites and mustard, which account for the majority of all food allergies. These allergens must be included in the list of ingredients but can also be in a statement on the label that begins with "Contains" such as "Contains peanuts."

Date Markings on a food label include Best Before and Expiration dates. **Best Before** dates are found on packaged foods with a shelf life of 90 days or less. This date marking tells us how long a properly stored, unopened food product will keep its freshness, taste, nutritional value and any other qualities that the manufacturer has claimed.

Expiration dates are required on foods with strict nutritional and compositional specifications that might not be met after the expiration date. You will find expiration dates on formulated liquid diets (oral or tube feed formulas that are nutritionally complete); meal replacements; nutritional supplements; human

milk substitutes like infant formula; and specific foods that are sold only by a pharmacist and only with a doctor's written order. Foods past the expiration date may not have the same nutrient content as stated on the food label and should not be bought, sold or eaten and should be discarded.

Optional Statements

Other claims you might find on a food label are Product of Canada, Made in Canada and nutrition claims. While not mandatory, if a company wants to put these types of claims on their food label, there are specific guidelines that they must follow to ensure accuracy and consistency of this information.

What's the difference between Product of Canada and Made in Canada and why include this claim? They both help us identify foods that are grown or made in Canada. **Product of Canada** indicates that all, or almost all, of the food as well as the processing and labour to make the food is Canadian. This means foods with this label were grown

or raised by Canadian farmers and prepared and packaged by Canadian food companies. Foods with small amounts of imported ingredients like spices, vitamins, food additives and flavourings can still be labelled Product of Canada if they meet the requirements stated above.

When a food label has **Made in Canada from domestic and imported ingredients**, it means that a Canadian company is involved in some of the preparation, and it contains some food grown by Canadian producers and some imported food. A **Made in Canada from imported ingredients** claim indicates that a Canadian company is involved in some of the preparation of the food and the contents of the food were imported.

Nutrition Claims can highlight specific nutrients, foods or ingredients and are regulated by the FDR and Health Canada. The two types of nutrition claims are nutrient content claims and health claims and foods must meet specific criteria to use these claims. **Nutrient content claims** indicate an amount of a nutrient in a food to help you choose foods that have more or less of that nutrient. For pulses, you might see “High in Fibre,” “Source of Fibre,” “Reduced in Sodium” or “No Salt Added.” **Health claims** describe potential health effects of a food when eaten as part of a healthy diet. They include **function claims** like wheat bran promoting regularity or Vitamin D helping to build strong bones and teeth and **disease risk**

reduction claims like “oat fibre helps reduce cholesterol.” The pulse industry is currently working on a health claim for beans and heart health which could lead to this information appearing on the labels of whole beans in the future!

The Last Word

Food labels are your guide to reliable and trustworthy information about the packaged foods you buy for you and your family. They can

also help point consumers towards Canadian grown and produced foods to support our local pulse industry along with adding nutritious, delicious Canadian grown pulses to their plates!

Questions about pulse nutrition, recipes or APG programs? Contact APG’s Food & Nutrition Coordinator Debra McLennan at dmclennan@albertapulse.com or (780) 986-9398 ext. 109.



This Nutrition Facts Table on a can of baked beans gives consumers helpful nutrition information.

References (accessed online April 2024)

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