



The country's major annual consumer nutrition promotion campaign

Nutrition Information on Food Labels Help Make Wise Food Choices

By *Dr Chin Yit Siew and Dr Roseline Yap,*
Representatives from Nutrition Society of Malaysia

In the fast-paced rhythm of modern life, pre-packaged foods such as milk, bread, and rice have become staple purchases when grocery shopping. Amidst the aisles stacked high with these pre-packaged essentials, many often base their purchasing decision on brand and price. Have you ever taken a moment to look at and consider the nutrition information listed on packaging? These often-overlooked labels are not just decorative additions to packaging. Instead, they hold the key to understanding the nutritional content of the foods we consume and are powerful tools for us to make informed healthier dietary choices when buying food products.

Important Nutritional Labels on Pre-packaged Foods

(1) Nutrition Information Panel (NIP)

The Nutrition Information Panel (NIP), typically located at the back of the package, contains information on the nutrients found in pre-packaged foods, making it a crucial section to consider when making informed choices about what we eat. By checking the NIP, you can easily assess the amount of energy, carbohydrates, total sugars, protein and fat in the product. Other nutrients listed under the NIP include vitamins, minerals, dietary fibre, cholesterol, and sodium. Therefore, it is important to choose products based on the nutritional content that best suits your personal nutritional needs.

The law requires all nutritional information to be declared on the label of pre-packaged foods and beverages, making it easier for consumers to compare the nutritional content of different products. For example, when comparing two similar products of different brands, it is important to compare nutritional information under the '*per 100 g*' (in foods) or '*per 100 ml*' (in beverages) column, rather than the '*per serving size*' column as serving sizes can differ across brands or products.

(2) Ingredient List

This section, which contains the full list of the ingredients, is often located below the NIP on the back/side of a pre-packaged food product. The list is organised according to the weight of the ingredients therefore ingredients which make up majority of the product will be listed first, while those in smaller quantities will be at the end of the list. As a general rule, do pay attention to the first three ingredients listed, as these are the main ingredients of a pre-packaged product.

Besides knowing the major ingredients in the product, the ingredient list is important for individuals with food allergies or dietary constraints (i.e. peanut allergy and gluten intolerance). The information allows them to check whether they can consume the product. In addition, some ingredients have other names such as maltodextrin, which is a type of carbohydrate/sugar. These are not shown in the NIP but can be found in the ingredient list. Hence, consumers are able to cross-check the total sugars from the NIP, including the type of sugars in the product from the ingredient list.

(3) Front of Pack Energy Label

Pre-packaged foods have an energy icon on the front, which provides a quick overview of the product's energy (calorie) content. It is important to note that the values presented on these icons are based on the amount of energy contained in one serving of the packaged food. This value is represented as a percentage of energy that contributes

to the average daily energy requirement of an adult (2000 kcal). Therefore, using this label can help effectively plan daily energy intake according to your personal energy needs.

(4) Nutrition Claims

Many pre-packaged foods have labels with nutritional claims on them, typically displayed on the front package of the product. In Malaysia, there are more than three types of nutritional claims, some of which can be found on packaged foods. One example is a **nutrient content claim**, which is used to highlight the amount of a nutrient present in a product. Another example is a **nutrient function claim**, which underlines the function of a nutrient found in a product. Examples of these claims, and what they mean, can be found in **Table 1** below.

Table 1: Examples of the different types of nutrient claims and what they mean.

Type of Claim	Example Terms	Explanation
Nutrient Content Claim	<i>"Low in..."</i> <i>"Free of..."</i> <i>"Zero..."</i>	The product contains certain nutrients in reduced amounts (e.g. fat, sugar, sodium, or cholesterol)
	<i>"Source of..."</i> <i>"Rich in..."</i> <i>"High in..."</i>	The product contains certain nutrients that are encouraged to be consumed (e.g. calcium, dietary fibre, or protein)
Nutrient Function Claim	<i>"...helps improve..."</i> <i>"...promotes..."</i> <i>"...is needed for..."</i>	The product contains a nutrient that has a role in certain physiological function (e.g. Calcium promotes strong bones and teeth)

Nutrition claims can provide additional information about the nutrients found in a product, and are therefore important in choosing foods that best suit your personal nutritional needs. Although they provide some information about a product's nutritional content, it should not be relied upon solely. Combining this information with the Nutrition Information Panel (NIP) ensures a comprehensive overview of a product's nutritional profile.

(5) Healthier Choice Logo (HCL)

The Healthier Choice Logo (HCL) is an initiative introduced by the Ministry of Health Malaysia in 2017. It is awarded to foods and beverages if the product meets a certain nutrient criteria. When you spot a HCL logo on the front package of a product, this indicates that it is a "healthier" choice compared to others in the same category. For instance, a breakfast cereal with the HCL logo may contain lower levels of sugar and higher amounts of fibre compared to similar cereals without the logo. Therefore, it can help consumers to easily identify healthier options when shopping for groceries. However, it's essential to keep in mind that while the HCL logo highlights healthier options within the same category, some products may still contain sugars, fats/oils, or salt. So, look beyond the logo to ensure you are making the healthiest choice. Take into consideration the information found on the Nutritional Information Panel (NIP), ingredient list, and nutrition claims.

Conclusion

Striving to make healthier food choices begins with reading nutrition information on food labels. It is also important to take into consideration the expiry dates of pre-packaged foods, which can also be found on the packaging of various products. By understanding this information, you can make healthier and better informed decisions that best suit your dietary needs or preferences. Remember, every mindful choice brings us closer to a healthier body.

Nutrition Month Malaysia is back with an exciting Food-Fit-Fun Fair in Pavilion Bukit Jalil this
Coming 22 – 26 May 2024! Bring your family and join us for fun engaging activities, free nutrition
screening and dietary advice from nutritionists and dietitians and grab goodies from our exhibitors.
Find out how everyone in your family can realise their health and wellness goals for a healthier life.
For more information visit, <https://www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my/>