



Feeding the under 3s  
the food they need

# Understanding food labels

Guidance & Tips for Parents

[www.littlepeoplesplates.co.uk](http://www.littlepeoplesplates.co.uk)



## FOOD LABELS: THE FACTS

Toddlers need a healthy balanced diet to ensure they receive everything they need for growth and development.

Food labels provide important nutritional information for parents and carers. However, this information is often confusing and does not always tell you everything you need to know. Although the labelling of foods and drinks is regulated by European laws, much of the information that shoppers need to make the right food choices is not included because it is not compulsory. Also, many people find it difficult to understand the information on a label.

- By law food labels must include information on ingredients, guidance on storage, a 'best before' date, allergy advice and instructions for use.
- There are 14 ingredients that commonly cause allergies. If a food contains any of these, they must be listed on the label.

### The ingredients are:

- Celery
- Cereals containing gluten (wheat, barley, rye and oats)
- Crustaceans i.e. a type of shellfish such as lobster and crab
- Eggs
- Fish
- Lupin
- Milk
- Molluscs i.e. another type of shellfish such as mussels and oysters
- Mustard
- Nuts that grow on trees such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts
- Peanuts
- Sesame seeds
- Soybeans
- Sulphur dioxide and sulphites if they are above 10mg per kg food or per litre liquid. These are preservatives used in some foods and drinks.



- Food labelling laws do not apply to fresh food or individual packs within multipacks.
- If a food is labelled as suitable for children under three years old, it should comply with strict rules on what it can and cannot contain. If the food does not contain an exact age recommendation, these rules do not apply, even if the food is clearly packaged to appeal to young children.



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There are two different systems of giving at-a-glance nutritional information.

**The traffic light system** offers a quick way to judge the amount of calories, fat, carbohydrate, sugar and salt in a food. It uses red, amber and green labels to show whether a food or drink has a high, medium or low amount of the following:

- calories
- fat
- saturated fat
- sugar
- salt

A red or amber light does not necessarily mean a food is unhealthy. You need to judge its overall content, and consider it within a healthy balanced daily diet. For example cheese is a nutritious food for toddlers because it contains calcium, protein and certain vitamins, but it will be labelled as high in saturated fat and salt because of how cheese is made. Milk and fruit are healthy foods but both contain natural sugars. Foods containing milk or fruit will therefore usually be labelled high in sugar.

**The GDA system** shows the nutrients for adults and children between five and 10 years old. The system displays the calories and nutrients in a serving as well as the percentage of the guideline daily amount. RNIs and DRVs are age-specific as children require different amounts of nutrients depending on their age group.

This table shows the average energy requirements and RNIs or DRVs for nutrients for toddlers aged one to three years compared to the GDAs that are shown on some food labels:

|                      | Guideline Daily Amounts |            |                   |                                  | RNIs or DRVs |               |
|----------------------|-------------------------|------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
|                      | Adult Female            | Adult Male | Children 5-10 yrs |                                  | Boys 1-3 yrs | Girls 1-3 yrs |
| <b>Calories</b>      | 2000kcal                | 2500kcal   | 1800kcal          | <b>Calories</b>                  | 1230kcal     | 1165kcal      |
| <b>Protein</b>       | 45g                     | 55g        | 24g               | <b>Protein</b>                   | 14.5g        | 14.5g         |
| <b>Carbohydrates</b> | 230g                    | 300g       | 220g              | <b>Carbohydrates</b>             | 154g         | 146g          |
| <b>Sugars</b>        | 90g                     | 120g       | 85g               | <b>Non-milk extrinsic sugar*</b> | 34g          | 32g           |
| <b>Fat</b>           | 70g                     | 95g        | 70g               | <b>Fat</b>                       | 48g          | 45g           |
| <b>Saturated Fat</b> | 20g                     | 30g        | 20g               | <b>Saturated Fat</b>             | 15g          | 14g           |
| <b>Fibre</b>         | 24g                     | 24g        | 15g               | <b>Fibre</b>                     | 6-8g         | 6-8g          |
| <b>Salt</b>          | 6g                      | 6g         | 4g                | <b>Salt</b>                      | 2g           | 2g            |
| <b>Sodium</b>        | 2.4g                    | 2.4g       | 1.6g              | <b>Sodium</b>                    | 0.8g         | 0.8g          |

\* Non-milk extrinsic sugars include table sugar, other forms of sugar including syrups and glucose, and fructose in honey, fruit juices and processed fruit. They do not include lactose in milk and milk products, nor fructose in fresh whole fruit.

- **RDA means Recommended Daily Amount.** It is set for adults not children.
- **GDA means Guideline Daily Amount.** It is set by the food industry for either adults or children of a specified age.
- **RNI means Reference Nutrient Intake.** It gives the recommended intake for specific ages.
- **DRV means Dietary Reference Value.** It gives the recommended energy intake for specific age groups.
- When looking for low sugar foods it is best to compare the sugar contents of similar foods.
- Do not expect any foods to be sugar-free because there are natural sugars in most foods. It is important that toddlers enjoy their food and a little sugar is normal.
- If you want to know more about the content of a food you can visit the food company's website or contact it directly. For more detailed dietary advice you can contact a registered dietitian via your GP, Primary Care Trust or [www.dietitiansunlimited.co.uk](http://www.dietitiansunlimited.co.uk).



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