

Low- fact labels

March 2005

CAMPAIGN REPORT

which
?

Our tests expose biscuits with three times more saturated fat and pizza with 80 per cent extra fat than the labels claim



The products in our basket all contained significantly more – or less – of certain nutrients than stated on the label

Whether the latest fad is low carb, low fat or low calorie – or you just want to follow a balanced diet – nutrition labels on foods are important. But the results of our tests on 70 foods show they can be wildly inaccurate. Just 7 per cent of the 570 nutrients we tested matched up exactly with what the label said. And 17 per cent fell outside the agreed error margin.

WHAT WE FOUND

Most processed foods carry nutrition labels, though it's compulsory only where a food makes a claim such as 'low fat' or 'high in fibre'. But there's no specific law about how



for all consumers

accurate the information should be. Labels need show only average nutrition values, and these can be worked out in different ways – none of which is 100 per cent reliable. Some manufacturers calculate the figures from nutrition information about each ingredient – based either on tests or standard published information. A more accurate method is to analyse the finished product, as we did. But even this isn't foolproof, as batches of the same food can differ nutritionally. An extra chunk of meat in a pie, say, could make all the difference.

Because labels can rarely be spot on, Lacors, the body that advises trading standards officers about enforcing food laws, gives guidance about acceptable error margins. For the main nutrients, this is 20 per cent either side of the labelled value. Where nutrients make up between 2 and 5 per cent of a food, the margin increases to 30 per cent. Yet nearly one in five of the nutrients on labels of the foods we tested fell outside even these generous margins. Some foods contained less than the labelled value, while others contained far more. Lacors' policy officer Les Bailey admits our findings are worrying: 'This highlights the fact that nutrition information on labels is not as precise as consumers may think.'

The worst offenders

The Rivington's Pink Panther wafers we tested had nearly three times more saturated fat than the label stated. So if you ate just two of the biscuits, you'd unwittingly consume an extra 3g of saturated fat (nearly a sixth of a woman's guideline daily amount). Our Global Cuisine beef joint contained 90 per cent more fat and 70 per cent more saturates than stated on the label. With 4.8g of fat per 100g, it certainly can't be described as 'less than 3 per cent fat', as the label claims. Similarly, Cadbury's light trifles aren't as 'light' as they say. We found 23 per cent more fat in our sample (an extra 1.7g of fat per pot). The Tesco Kids hot dog pizza label states 'controlled sugar' but we found 47 per cent more sugar than claimed.

Within the margin

Even where a value falls within the allowed margin, there can be a big difference between what it says on the packet and what you eat. The Asda chicken korma we tested contained 81 more calories than

Nearly one in five nutrients on

labels was significantly inaccurate

declared on the label. This might be significant if you're counting every calorie but, at just 12 per cent more, it counts as an acceptable difference. Our Morrisons Eat Smart beef lasagne contained 2.3g more fat (26 per cent more) per serving than the label states.

Again, this variance is deemed acceptable as fat makes up less than 5 per cent of the lasagne's total ingredients.

WHAT THE COMPANIES SAID

Some manufacturers admitted mistakes. The makers of Cauldron sausages and Tesco deep pan pizza told us they already knew their labels were inaccurate, and have now updated them. Lambs Navy has also promised to change its ice cream label in light of our findings. More often, companies blamed variations in ingredients or recipes. A spokesperson for Bernard Matthews, whose turkey roll contained 22 per cent more fat than the label claimed, said: 'Some natural variation in fat will occur from slice to slice.' Cadbury, whose trifle contains 37 different ingredients, told us that, 'given the variable mix of ingredients, there will inevitably be variances between pots'.

The next time you're comparing food labels, it's worth remembering that those seemingly precise figures might not tell the whole story.

Confused about how much fat, sugar and salt is a lot?

Download our food shoppers' card from www.which.co.uk

Nutrition information

Nutrition labels can be hard to make sense of if you don't know off the top of your head how much fat or sugar you should be eating. These guidelines will help you put the labels in context.

NUTRIENT GUIDELINES

Here are the guideline daily amounts of sugar, fat, saturated fat and salt and fibre for an average adult. We also show the Food Standards Agency guidelines as to what constitutes a lot (and a little) of these nutrients per 100g of food.

	Per day		Per 100g of food	
	Men	Women	A lot	A little
Fat	95g	70g	20g	3g
Saturated fat	30g	20g	5g	1g
Sugar	70g	50g	10g	2g
Fibre	20g	16g	3g	0.5g
Salt (sodium)	less than 6g (2.5g)		1.25g (0.5g)	0.25g (0.1g)

CHILDREN AND SALT

For children, there are different maximum daily intakes of salt, as follows. Sodium (often shown on food labels) is a component of salt. High levels of it can increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.

0 to 12 months	1g (0.4g sodium)
1 to 3 years	2g (0.8g sodium)
4 to 6 years	3g (1.2g sodium)
7 to 10 years	5g (2.4g sodium)
from the age of 11	6g (2.5g sodium) as for adults

WHAT THE CLAIMS MEAN

According to Food Standards Agency guidelines, products can make the following nutrition claims only if they meet these criteria.

Low fat	No more than 3g per 100g/ml
Low saturates	No more than 1.5g per 100g/ml, and saturates should be no more than 10 per cent of the food
Low sugar	No more than 5g per 100g/ml
Low salt/sodium	No more than 0.1g salt (0.04g sodium) per 100g/ml per 100g/ml
Reduced	At least 25 per cent less than the standard food

By using the figures above, you can work out that the product on the left contains half the recommended daily sodium intake for an adult

which? says

We've long lobbied for compulsory full nutrition labelling (energy, fat, protein, carbohydrate, fibre, sugar, saturates and salt) to help people compare foods and make healthy choices. But our tests show

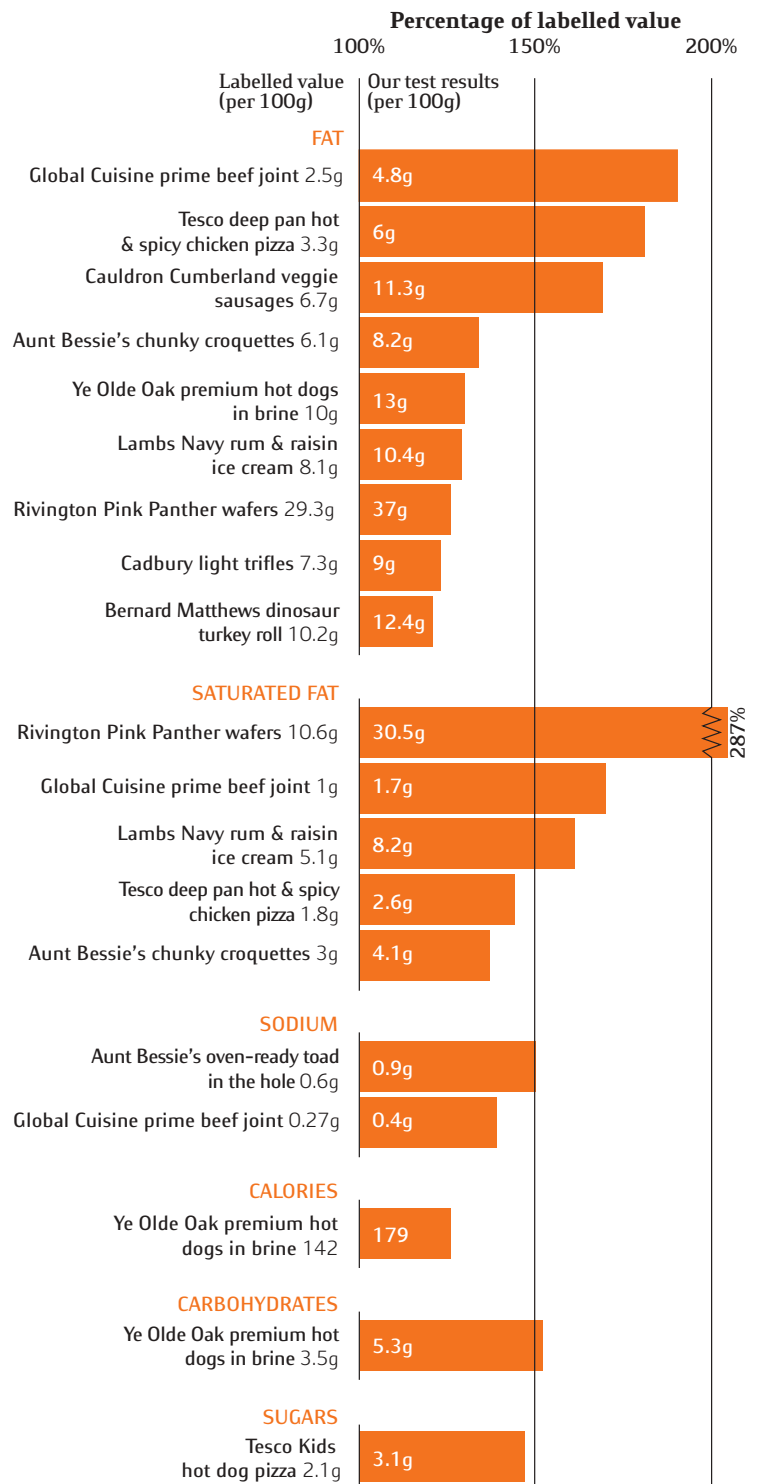
these labels can be wrong. We agree with Les Bailey from Lacors that 'manufacturers should strive to make the information they provide as accurate as possible'. This is especially important where foods make

particular nutritional claims such as low fat. We're also pushing for a new traffic-light style labelling system for foods that will help you see easily at a glance which products are high or low in certain nutrients.



Our test results

We analysed the energy, protein, carbohydrate, sugars, fat, saturates, fibre and sodium (salt) content of 70 processed foods. The chart shows foods that contained significantly more than the labelled values. On the left, we show the amount of the nutrient per 100g as declared on the label. The right-hand bar shows the amount we found in our tests, displayed as a percentage of the amount declared on the label.



For further information on our nutrition campaign, please tel: 020 7770 7000

More information can also be found on our website (www.which.co.uk)

Published by Which? 2 Marylebone Road, London NW1 4DF.

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