

Understanding Ingredients Labels

Every product has an ingredient list. For small bulk items, it might be on the carton rather than the individual package. Ingredients are listed in descending order -- as you read through the list, the amounts by weight get smaller and smaller. Usually the first three to five ingredients (not including water) tell you the most; however, artificial sweeteners and caffeine don't weigh very much so they are usually near the end of the ingredient list.

Milk Ingredients: Milk needs to be the first ingredient for the Milk-based foods and Milk-based beverages categories. Look for these words:

- Milk (whole/2%/1%/skim, non fat)
- Evaporated Milk
- Skim Milk Powder
- 'Milk Ingredients', Milk Solids (may be modified)

Trans fats are strictly limited in the Guidelines. If there is no Nutrition Facts Label, these words in the ingredient list give you an idea of how much trans fat might be in the product:

- Shortening
- Margarine (not all have trans fat)
- Partially hydrogenated oil

Sugar substitutes: Sugar substitutes are a class of food additives regulated by Health Canada and include both artificial sweeteners and intense sweeteners obtained from natural sources. Similar to other food additives, sugar substitutes are only permitted for use once a safety assessment has been conducted by Health Canada.

In Canada, the following sugar substitutes are approved for use in foods:

- acesulfame potassium
- aspartame (e.g. Nutrasweet)
- neotame
- steviol glycosides
- sucralose (e.g. Splenda)
- sugar alcohols including sorbitol, lactitol, maltitol, mannitol, xylitol, erythritol, isomalt and hydrogenated starch hydrolysates
- thaumatin

Note: The artificial sweetener cyclamate is not permitted as a food additive in pre-packaged foods in Canada. It is only available as a table top sweetener (e.g. Sugar Twin; Sucaryl).

Sugars can be from many sources and in many forms. Look for these words on the ingredient list for added sugars:

- “Ose” words: sucrose, fructose, dextrose, maltose, etc
- Syrups: cane syrup, rice syrup, corn syrup, maple syrup, etc
- Concentrated fruit juice (used to sweeten many products other than 100% fruit juice, but adds very few nutrients to the products)
- Honey, molasses

Salt can be from these sources, but check the Nutrition Facts Label for total sodium:

- Salt, Sea Salt
- Sodium
- Sodium chloride
- Soy sauce
- MSG (monosodium glutamate)
- Baking soda, baking powder

Caffeine is listed as an ingredient only if it is added to something. Coffee drinks would not list caffeine as an ingredient, but cola drinks would. Cocoa contains caffeine but is unlikely to exceed the caffeine restrictions in the Guidelines. If the following ingredients are present, caffeine levels are likely to exceed the restrictions in the Guidelines:

- Caffeine
- Coffee (not coffee flavouring)
- Tea (black or green or white)
- Matè, Yerba, Yerba Matè
- Guarana

For more help in reading ingredient lists and determining caffeine content, contact your local Community Nutritionist.