

SUGARS, CARBOHYDRATES AND THE NEW FOOD LABEL

Background

In January 2003, Health Canada announced new regulations that will require food labels for most packaged foods to declare the content of calories and 13 core nutrients in a *Nutrition Facts Table*. The new regulations also include revised criteria for nutrient content claims and five new diet-related health claims.

The primary goal of the new nutrition labelling is to help Canadians make more informed food choices, and compare products more easily. Most food companies must comply with the new regulations by December 2005. Until that time, product labels will be permitted to comply with either the old or new regulations.

Carbohydrates in the Nutrition Facts Table

The total amount of carbohydrate and two types of carbohydrate (sugars and fibre) in a serving of food are among the 13 core nutrients that must be listed on the *Nutrition Facts Table*. Other carbohydrate components (starch, soluble and insoluble fibre and sugar alcohols) may be voluntarily listed.

Sugars refer to all monosaccharides (e.g. glucose, fructose) and disaccharides (e.g. sucrose, lactose) present in foods (e.g. milk, fruit and vegetables) or added to foods (e.g. table sugar, honey or syrups). Each mono- or disaccharide, regardless of source, is chemically the same and has the same effects on health.

With the exception of sugars, Health Canada provided rationale for the inclusion of each core nutrient based on their importance to public health. Expert reviews by Health Canada's Nutrition Labelling Advisory Committee and the University of Toronto Program in Food Safety concluded that there is no public health reason to include sugars on the core list because they are not involved in the etiology of lifestyle-related diseases. It appears that sugars were included on the mandatory core list due to consumer preference and to be consistent with the U.S. label.

Health Canada's *Nutrition Recommendations* state that the Canadian diet should provide 55% of energy as carbohydrate from a variety of food sources. Canadians are also advised to increase their dietary fibre intake by following *Canada's*

Food Guide to Healthy Eating. When reading a food label, looking at % Daily Value (DV) can help meet these recommendations.

The DVs that have been established for carbohydrate, fat, and saturated plus trans fat are defined as "reference standards", and are outlined in the *Food and Drug Regulations*. These DVs are based on a 2000 calorie diet. The DV for carbohydrate is 300 g.

In the *Nutrition Facts Table*, nutrient content is expressed as a percentage of Daily Value (i.e. % DV), and is required for all nutrients except protein and sugars (cholesterol is optional). For sugars, there is no DV because there is no recommended level of intake for healthy populations.

Nutrition Facts	
Per 125 mL (87 g)	
Amount	% Daily Value
Calories 80	
Fat 0.5 g	1 %
Saturated 0 g	
+ Trans 0 g	0 %
Cholesterol 0 mg	
Sodium 0 mg	0 %
Carbohydrate 18 g	6 %
Fibre 2 g	8 %
Sugars 2 g	
Protein 3 g	
Vitamin A 2 %	Vitamin C 10 %
Calcium 0 %	Iron 2 %

Nutrient Content Claims for Carbohydrates

Nutrient content claims are statements that highlight or describe the amount of a nutrient in a food. A variety of nutrient content claims pertaining to sugars and carbohydrates are permitted, however new conditions apply for foods to qualify for certain claims. Only the terms and wording outlined in the *Food and Drug Regulations* can be used to make a claim.

PERMITTED CLAIMS

Sugar-free – can be used if the product is both free of sugars and "free of energy"; however, the definition of "free of energy" has changed slightly (see chart that follows).

Reduced/lower in sugars – the criteria for this claim have not changed, but the terms "reduced" and "lower" have now been differentiated.

No added sugars – permitted despite the fact that Health Canada stated that this claim "is not generally considered to have a health basis". "No added sugars" claim was previously permitted on products that contained no added sucrose, even if other sugars were added (e.g. honey, molasses, concentrated fruit juice, other mono- and disaccharides). Because

the source of sugars does not affect its chemical composition or effects on health, the new regulations only permit this claim if no sugars of any kind are added to the product.

Unsweetened – this claim was previously synonymous with “no added sugars”; it can now only be made if the food contains “no added sugars” or intense sweeteners.

CLAIMS NO LONGER PERMITTED

Low/light in sugar – no longer permitted because Canada’s *Nutrition Recommendations* do not advise restriction of sugar. The term “light” is still permitted for products reduced in fat or energy.

Low/reduced carbohydrate – Carbohydrate restriction is

no longer part of the dietary guidance for the management of diabetes.

Source of complex carbohydrate – An expert review by the Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization recently concluded that the terms “simple carbohydrate” and “complex carbohydrate” should no longer be used because these terms do not reflect the effects of carbohydrates on health. For instance, some starches (complex carbohydrate) increase blood glucose more than sugars (simple carbohydrate). The physiologic effects of carbohydrates are described better by the terms glycemic carbohydrate (includes digestible sugars, oligosaccharides and starches) and fibre (non-digestible carbohydrate).

SUGAR-RELATED CLAIMS	OLD REGULATIONS	NEW REGULATIONS
“sugar-free”, “free of sugar” “no sugar”, “0 sugar”, “zero sugar”, “without sugar”, “contains no sugar”, “sugarless”	Only for foods for special dietary use. Contains ≤ 0.25% available carbohydrate and “free of energy” (≤ 1cal/100 g).	Contains < 0.5 g sugars per reference amount and “free of energy” (< 5 cal per reference amount).
“reduced in sugar”, “reduced sugar”, “sugar-reduced”, “less sugar”, “lower sugar”, “lower in sugar”	Compared to a reference food, contains ≥ 25% less sugars and ≥ 5 g less sugars/ serving, and no increase in energy.	Compared to a <i>similar reference food</i> , contains ≥ 25% less sugars and ≥ 5 g less sugars/reference amount.
“lower in sugar”, “less sugar”, “lower sugar”	Same as above	Compared to a <i>reference food of the same food group</i> , contains ≥ 25% less sugars and ≥ 5 g less sugars/reference amount.
“no added sugar”, “no sugar added”, “without added sugar”	Contains no added sucrose, but may contain other sugars (honey, molasses, fruit juice, fructose, glucose). If other sugars, must state “sweetened with...”	Contains no added sugars, no ingredients containing added sugars or ingredients that contain sugars that substitute for added sugars.
“unsweetened”	Contains no added sucrose or other sugars.	Meets requirements for “no added sugar” and contains no sweeteners.
“low in sugar”, “light”	≤ 2 g sugars/serving; ≤ 10% sugars on a dry basis.	Not permitted
“low carbohydrate”	≤ 2 g available carbohydrate/serving; ≤ 10% available carbohydrate.	Not permitted
“carbohydrate-reduced”	Only for foods for special dietary use; ≤ 50% available carbohydrate normally in that food when not carbohydrate-reduced. No increase in energy.	Not permitted
“source of complex carbohydrate”	≥ 10 g starch/serving.	Not permitted