

Information about the product

WHY ARE LABELS NECESSARY?

In the 19th century, industrial and technological developments completely transformed the food sector. This was seen through new products such as **tinned food** and **powdered food**. The issue with these new industrial products was that it was hard for the consumer to know what the contents were. They needed some explanations and this is why food labelling became essential.

What should a food label include?

Current labelling must include a product description such as ‘powdered milk’ or ‘blossom honey’. This is the **product name**, which is also known as the sales description. The label must also include the **net amount**, for example 200 g, **and the use-by date**.

WHAT IS THE USE-BY DATE?

What is the use-by date? This can refer to two types of date.

When on a product you see ‘**To be used before**’, this is called the **use-by date**. After this date, the food product is likely to be risky in terms of health.

Maybe you have also seen on a product ‘**Best before...**’. In this case, this is an **optimal date before which the food should be consumed**, meaning that after that date, the quality of the food is not guaranteed, although it does not actually pose a health risk. For example, the quality may refer to taste, texture or nutritional value. Even if a product is over this date limit, it can often still be eaten.

LIST OF INGREDIENTS

As you know, the label must also include the list of ingredients. You should be aware that the ingredients are listed by **descending weight order**. The first ingredient listed is therefore the one that comprises the largest proportion of the food. The list especially includes **food additives** and **allergens**. This somewhat complicates matters.

WHAT IS A FOOD ADDITIVE?

What is a food additive? An additive is a fairly wide term because it refers to several substances, for example **colourings**, **preservatives**, or **acidifying agents**. These substances can be natural or synthetic. Additives aim to improve the product somehow. This can be the product's appearance, how well it keeps, or its flavour or texture. Additives must be named according to category, then either their scientific name or their European symbol.

In Europe, if you see a substance in the list of ingredients beginning with the letter E followed by a 3-figure number, this denotes a food additive. The letter E stands for Europe and the 3 figures refer to a category of additives.

There are several categories of additives.

FOOD COLOURINGS

Keywords > E100 to E199 (colouring)

In Europe, the first category is colourings. The letter E is followed by the figure 1 to indicate the relevant category of colourings. The next 2 figures indicate the shade. For example E120 is a red food colouring.

Keywords > E120 (red colouring)

The colour of food is a very important factor in whether or not we choose to eat it. In industrial food production, colourings are used for a range of reasons. They may be to reproduce a colour which has disappeared during the manufacturing process, or to highlight an existing colour, or to colour a foodstuff without any colour of its own, to make it more appealing.

PRESERVATIVES AND ANTIOXIDANTS

Keywords > E200 to E299 (preservatives)

Keywords > E300 to E399 (antioxidants)

The E200 series corresponds to preservatives and the E300 series corresponds to antioxidants. An antioxidant, as its name suggests, neutralises the action of oxygen. Consequently, food can be kept and consumed for longer periods of time. The E400 series improves the texture of food thanks to emulsifying agents and stabilisers, thickeners and gelling agents. As you can see, there are many different additives, each one playing a specific role.

ALLERGENS

The most risky allergens are listed in legislation and it is mandatory for them to be stated on food labels. For example, you will see after the ingredients a statement such as 'Contains soya'. Soya is an ingredient which can be potentially allergenic. There are other allergens. For example, fish, seafood, peanuts, eggs, milk, nuts and sulphites will all be indicated on the list of ingredients. Therefore, you need to be observant. You should also be aware that, if a product is manufactured, stored or transported with another one, it is possible to find traces of allergens. In that case, if it is impossible to avoid them or eliminate them completely, the label must include comments such as 'May contain traces of nuts' or 'Soya may be present'. These comments can be found after the list of ingredients.

OTHER INFORMATION

A food label can also mention the product's origin, for example its country of origin. It may also provide quality assurances. For example 'Organic' refers to organic farming practices and AOC means *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* (a term controlling the geographical origin of a product). There are others like the Red Label or *Indication Géographique Protégée* (Protected Geographical Origin). Sometimes labels will also include instructions for use, to make it easier to use the product. You will also find the manufacturer's name and address, or something indicating the factory and the production batch.