Food Labels
What do they mean?

1 Nutrition information panel.
Most packaged foods must have a nutrition information panel. The information must be presented in a standard format which shows the amount per serve and per 100g (or 100mL) of the food. Examples of a nutrition information panel and the nutrients that have to be listed in the nutrition information have been outlined below.

- very small packages which are about the size of a larger chewing gum packet
- foods with no significant nutritional value (such as a single herb or spice), tea, and coffee
- foods sold unpackaged (unless a nutrition claim is made)
- foods made and packaged at the point of sale, for example bread made in a local bakery.

2 Percentage labelling.
Packaged foods have to carry labels which show the percentage of the key or characterising ingredients or components in the food product. This will enable you to compare similar products. The characterising ingredient for the fruit salad yoghurt is fruit. If you can see from the ingredient list that it is banana 8%, strawberry 4%, grape 4%, peach 2%, and pineapple 2%, an example of a percentage of a characterising component would be the amount of cocoa solids in chocolate. Some foods, such as ‘white bread’ or ‘cheese’, have no characterising ingredients.

3 Name or description of the food.
Foods must be labelled with an accurate name or description, for example fruit yoghurt must contain fruit. If it were to contain fruit flavouring rather than real fruit, the label would need to say “flavoured yoghurt”.

4 Food recall information.
Considering the number of foods available, recalls of unsafe or unpalatable foods are uncommon. Food labels must have the name and business address in Australia or New Zealand of the manufacturer or importer, as well as the lot identification of the food (or date coding). This makes food recalls, on the rare occasion that they are necessary, more effective and reliable. In Australia each year there are about 10 food recalls, most of which are precautionary and due to the food manufacturer identifying a problem from their own testing. Details of Australian recalls are on the Food Standards Australia New Zealand website at www.foodstandards.gov.au. New Zealand recalls are on the New Zealand Food Safety Authority website www.nzfsa.govt.nz.

5 Information for allergy sufferers.
Some foods, food ingredients or components of an ingredient can cause severe allergic reactions in some people – this is known as anaphylaxis. Foods such as peanuts, tree nuts (e.g. cashews, almonds, walnuts), shellfish, finned fish, milk, eggs, sesame and soybeans and their products, when present in food, may cause severe allergic reactions and must be declared on the label however small the amount. Gluten is also included in this list but the caution is more for those with Coeliac Disease rather than allergy. Those who are wheat allergic must stay away from all wheat including gluten. In addition, foods containing preservatives must be labelled as containing sulphites if they have 10 milligrams per kilogram or more of added sulphites. This is the level that may trigger asthma attacks in some asthmatics.

6 Date marking.
Packaged foods that have a shelf life of less than two years must have a ‘best before’ date. It may still be safe to eat those foods after the best before date but they may have lost quality and some nutritional value. Those foods that should not be consumed after a certain date for health and safety reasons must have a ‘use by’ date. An exception is bread which can be labelled with a ‘baked on’ or ‘baked for’ date if it shelf life is less than seven days.

7 Ingredient list.
You will usually find the ingredient list on the back of the product. Ingredients must be listed in descending order by (ingred ing weight). This means that when the food was manufactured the first ingredient listed contributed the largest amount and the last ingredient listed contributed the least, compared to the other ingredients. So, if fat, sugar or salt are listed near the start of the list the product contains a greater proportion of these ingredients.

8 Labels must tell the truth.
Suppliers must label food products with accurate weights and measures information. Weights and measures declarations are regulated by Australian State and Territory and New Zealand Government fair trading agencies. Fair trading laws and food laws in Australia and New Zealand require that labels do not mislead through false, misleading or deceptive representations. For example, a food with a picture of strawberries on the label must contain strawberries.

9 Food additives.
Food additives have many different purposes, including making processed food easier to use or ensuring food is preserved safely. They may come from a synthetic or a natural source. For example, emulsifiers prevent salad dressings from separating into layers and preservatives help the keep food fresh or fresh longer. All food additives must have a specific use and must be used in the lowest possible quantity that will achieve their purpose. Food additives must be identified, usually by a number, and included in the ingredient list. This allows people who may be sensitive to food additives to avoid them. A thickener has been used in this yoghurt - its additive number is 1442. A full list of numbers and additives can be obtained from the FSANZ website. Some additives are derived from food allergens which must be identified, for example lecithin (soy).

10 Legibility requirements.
Any labelling requirement legally required in the Food Standards Code must be clearly, prominent, and distinct from the background and in English. The size of the type in warning statements must be at least 3mm high, except on very small packages.

11 Directions for use and storage.
Where specific storage conditions are required in order for a product to keep until its ‘use by’ date, they must be clearly stated on the label. The label may state that the food should be kept refrigerated or kept at 4°C.

12 Country of origin.
Australian and New Zealand have different country of origin labelling requirements. In Australia, packaged, and some unpackaged, foods must state the country where the food was made or produced. This could just be identifying the country where the food was packaged for retail sale and, if any of the ingredients do not originate from Australia, a statement that the food is made from imported local and imported ingredients. Australian legislation also lays down rules about “Product of Australia”, which means it must be made in Australia from Australian ingredients, and “Made in Australia”, which means it is made in Australia with significant imported ingredients. In New Zealand, country of origin requirements only apply to seafood.

For more information about food labelling on the FSANZ website see www.foodstandards.gov.au or in the book Choosing the Right Stuff: the official source book for consumers, ISBN 0 646 343 97. For expert nutrition and dietary advice contact your family doctor or an accredited practicing dietician. You can find a dietitian in a number of ways:

In Australia: Contact Nutrition Australia at www.nutritionaustralia.org. Visit the ‘Find a dietitian’ section of the Dietitians Association of Australia website www.dona.asn.au or call 1800 812 942 to find an Accredited Practising Dietitian near you.

In New Zealand: Contact the New Zealand Nutrition Foundation on (09) 489 3417, email info@nutrition.org.nz or go to www.foodstandards.co.nz/nutritionfoundation or visit the ‘Find a Dietitian’ section of the New Zealand Dietetic Association website at www.dietans.org.nz or check the Yellow Pages.

Disclaimer: The poster has been produced as a guide to consumers only. Industry and enforcement agencies should refer to the Food Standards Code.