

Labelling requirements for retail food products

What are the legal requirements for product labelling for retail and what needs to be included on your packaging? Food labelling is a complex area and you may wish to seek further advice when designing packaging artwork and labels - what follows is a general guide. Trading Standards departments are able to provide more detailed information and will often support label compliance, although more recently, they are increasingly likely to make charges for this service.

The name of the product

If there is a customary or well known name use it e.g. Lasagne or if not, use a name that will not be confusing or misleading. Where a product title indicates a named ingredient, the ingredient will need to be listed with a percentage within the product. Misleading names or photos that do not make clear what is in the pack (such as references to serving suggestion where other products are photographed) must be included, where applicable.

In addition, there are some products that are required to have a prescribed compositional content by law, such as butterfat in whole, semi-skimmed and skimmed milks or minimum % meat content of pies, sausages and burgers. Some product names, such as Cornish Clotted Cream, Stilton, Parma Ham are subject to requirements to meet Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and may only be produced to prescribe regions or methods of production and are reserved from general use by others.

Ingredients list

A full ingredients list must be worded in order of weight, with the main ingredient first according to the amounts that were used to make the food. Where products contain a compound ingredient, such as wheat flour, there will also need to be a bracketed breakdown of constituent ingredients included within the declaration list and following the compound ingredient. Declarations may also need to include specific reference to additives such as preservatives, colours with reference to names or e numbers for the additive. Point of sale signs for open food may also need to include these details.

Allergens

These should be highlighted in bold within the ingredients list. Or they can be underlined, or appear in a different colour to emphasise them. (See information sheet 1.10 for managing allergens). There is normally a statement following the ingredient list to highlight that allergens are marked in bold.

Font size

All packaging labelling and information should be written in a minimum of 1.2mm sized font. The one exception is if your packaging is below 80cm² in size in which case minimum font size is 0.9mm. It should be displayed in a clear font.

Weight or volume of product

All outer packaging of wrapped foods should provide an indication of the weight or for liquids, the volume of the final product and should be in accordance with indicated weights or volumes on the packaging. Where the indicated weight is present in the form of 55g (or 55ml) the packer must meet minimum weight packing requirements where no product is below the marked weight or volume. Where an indicated weight is given as 55g e (or 55ml e) this denotes that the product has been packed to average weight or volume requirements. Some weights or volumes from the batch are allowed to be below the nominal weight indicated as 55g e (or 55ml e), providing that the 'packers rules' relating to the batch have been met.

Lot or batch number

There needs to be an identifying code or number relating to the original production batch to trace to the original manufacture and packing date. Where a 'use by' or best before' date refers to an individual production date, this can also be used in place of or as well as an identified batch number.



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Best Before and Use By dates

A product can display either a Best Before/Best Before End or a Use By date, or include both and this will be dependent on the nature of product and shelf life. For highly perishable foods, the code will refer to 'Use By 25th December'. Other wrapped foods that are not highly perishable and having a shelf life of 3 months or less must be marked with a date 'Best Before 25th December, 2023'. For wrapped foods that are not highly perishable and having a shelf life of between 3 and 18 months, products may either be labelled with 'Best Before 25th December, 2023' or 'Best Before End December, 2023'. Similarly, with longer life, wrapped products of over 18 months, this must be in the form 'Best Before End 2023'.

Storage, preparation and serving instructions

Include clear and simple instructions on how to store to maintain product quality and safety, such as chilled, ambient or frozen, out of direct sunlight, cool, dry environments etc. If temperatures are required, these should be stated. In addition, serving instructions must define whether product is required to be heated and linked instructions to a validated method (such as 25 minutes in a pre-heated oven at 180C, or microwaving instructions with times and microwave power). Suitability for home-freezing may also be included, or 'previously frozen, do not re-freeze' on relevant products such as meat and fish products.

Business name and address

Food businesses must include a business name and address on the packaging or food label. Either:

- the name of the business whose name the food is marketed under; or
- the address of the business that has imported the food

Food products sold in NI must include a NI or EU address for the food business. If the food business is not in NI or EU, they must include the address of the importer, based in NI or the EU.

Nutritional Information

Packed products must include nutritional information table in a prescribed format. This must be shown in a table format and give values for energy (as kJ and kcal) and six nutrients as fat, of which saturated, carbohydrates, of which sugars, protein, and salt). This must be given in the units (including both kJ and kcal for energy) per 100g or 100ml, per serving as specified and the nutrition declaration must meet the minimum font size requirements as outlined above.

Identification Number (as required for animal origin, manufactured products)

This is a number that is given by the FSA or local authority for manufacturers of animal origin products and is included as an oval ID mark onto final packaging. Often this will be based on GB or EC export numbers comprising letters and/or numbers issued by the enforcing authority.

Free-from or other claims

This may include freedom from allergens, suitability for dietary preferences, religious or cultural compliance or methods of processing such as kosher, organic or halal and denoted by certification logos or printed symbols or text. In all cases, such claims are required to be substantiated by traceability and any relevant documentation.

What not to include!

Any un-proven information or product claims that cannot be scientifically be backed-up and can be mis-leading

Further explanation and free labelling and allergen training can be found here:

<https://labellingtraining.food.gov.uk/>

Food Labelling law is subject to change. Keep up to date at www.food.gov.uk

