

Food labelling - legal requirements and definitions

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What laws are there regarding food labelling?

The law on food labelling and composition is complex and subject to change. The information below is not a definitive interpretation to the law as only Courts can provide a definitive interpretation. Neither is information given regarding guidance on weights and measures law, which also applies to food labels.

The Food Safety Act 1990 makes it an offence to sell food for human consumption which:

- is injurious to health
- fails to comply with food safety requirements
- is falsely described, labelled or advertised for sale
- is not of the nature, substance or quality as demanded by the final consumer.

The Trade Descriptions Act 1968 makes it an offence to apply a false trade description to any goods or to offer to supply goods to which a false description is applied.

There are specific regulations enforced under the Food Safety Act 1990 such as:

- The Food Labelling Regulations, 1996 (as amended)
 - The Food Labelling (Amendment) Regulations 1998 and 1999
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Basic labelling requirements

Basic information required by law to appear on labels of most pre-packed foods includes the following.

Name of the food

The name should be sufficiently precise to inform the purchaser of the true nature of the food. It may be necessary to add a qualifying statement to clarify the name for example "Vegetable Samosa - a spicy vegetable filled pastry parcel."

If there is a name prescribed by law this must be used e.g. "prawns". Reserved names may only be used for foods meeting specific compositional criteria e.g. coffee, chocolate, and jam. Customary names that have become accepted in the UK without further explanation may also be used example "Cream Crackers" or "Muesli".

List of Ingredients

All the ingredients of the food, headed by the word "Ingredients" (or a phrase including that word), must be listed in descending order of weight.

Certain categories of ingredients such as additives must be identified by category name, e.g. "Preservative", and then identified by a specific (chemical) name or serial number, e.g. serial number, e.g. "sodium nitrate" or "E250".

Claims - Nutritional Information

Some claims are prohibited, example claims that food can prevent, treat or cure diseases or other "adverse conditions."

Nutritional claims about food such as "reduced energy", "rich in vitamins" etc. can only be made if the food meets set compositional standards. Such claims also require the provision of nutritional information. All nutritional information must be given in the form specified in the Regulations.

Claims - Medical or Health Information

See Claims -Nutritional Information in the section above.

Date Marking

There are two types:

1. Use by followed by Day and Month or Day, Month Year for perishable foods that usually need to be kept cold to maintain safety - example: meat, fish, dairy products, ready to eat salads.
2. Best Before - date until which the food will maintain its optimum quality, e.g. foods that become stale or develop off-flavours, such as biscuits, crisps, or soft drinks. Expressed as:
 - Best Before + Day, Month for foods with up to 3 months life, e.g. "Best Before 31 March";
 - Best Before End + Month, Year for food with more than 3 months shelf-life, example "Best Before End March 2006";
 - Best before End + Year for food with more than 18 months shelf-life, e.g. "Best Before End 2006".

Storage Conditions

Any special storage conditions must be described e.g. storage temperature for perishable foods.

Business name and address

The label must show the name and address of:

- the manufacturer or packer, (this can be anywhere in the world;) and/or,
- a seller established within the European Union.

Place of Origin

The place of origin of the food is required if not by giving it, the purchaser could be misled, example "English Brie Cheese".

Instructions for Use

Instructions for use are required if it would be difficult to use the food without them, example. "how to make a cake from cake mix".

Presenting Labelling Information

Labelling information must be clearly legible, indelible, conspicuous and easy to understand. In addition to English other languages may be included on the label.

Lot Mark

You must be able to identify batches of your product by a lot mark. This unique code that must be prefixed by the letter "L" if it cannot easily be differentiated from other codes. The date marking can double-up as the lot mark, provided it is in the form "day, month". Remember the smaller the size of the lot, the smaller the financial consequences of a product recall.

Field of Vision

The following must be in the same field of vision:

- the name of the food;
- the date mark
- weight or quantity (if required);
- alcohol strength by volume (if required).

General

It is against the law to pack or sell food which does not comply with food labelling legislation.

Other composition and labelling laws apply to specific foods and to foods containing colours, sweeteners and other additives.

What is QUID?

QUID is properly known as Food Quantity Declaration of Ingredients. Prepacked foods are required by law to be labelled with the quantity of certain ingredients.

What is an additive?

Antioxidants, sweeteners, colourants, flavour enhancers, flavourings, flour improvers, and preservatives have to be specified by type of additive only.

Who has to comply with the labelling laws?

All food businesses.

Who enforces them?

In the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and other London Authorities it is down to Environmental Health Officers to enforce the food labelling legislation.