

The Mysterious “e” on Food Package Weights

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Being a compulsive label reader, I came upon something while in Europe for a conference a while ago. Most people probably take for it for granted, but it intrigued me, and I wanted to know what it meant.

On the majority of packaged food products, there was a mysterious letter “e” before or after the weight of their contents. My best guess was that it probably meant “estimated” or “estimate”, but that didn’t seem very scientific.

Doing a bit of research into the matter, I found that the “e” did indeed stand for “estimated”. It is a symbol recognized and enforced by the European Union. As a result, there are strict rules governing its stylized shape and relative dimensions. Not only that, it must be placed close to the declared weight on the packaged goods label. In this way, the consumer will see the declared weight and the “e” symbol at the same time.

So what does the “estimated” symbol really mean?

Essentially, it is a means of assuring the consumer that they are getting an accurate weight of product while acknowledging that there can be reasonable variations in food packaging lines that may result in occasional weight discrepancies. However, this does not mean that the manufacturer can get away with under-filling packages deliberately to short-change the purchaser. In fact, it holds the manufacturer accountable to meeting stringent standards.

When using the “e” symbol, the manufacturer is certifying that the average weight of all packages of that product is above the declared value. The European Union (EU) then recognizes that there will be some packages which have contents below the declared weight. They will tolerate only small errors that put the actual package contents below the declared weight. These limits are specified in the EU legislation and are enforced on that basis. It is then up to the manufacturer to ensure that all packaged products comply with these regulations.

For the consumer, this means that, on average, they will be purchasing products that contain slightly more than the declared package weight. On the relatively rare occasions when the weight of the package contents is below that printed on the label, there will not be a substantial “slack fill”.

The statistics behind this can be a bit daunting, but the net result is that the manufacturers are delivering a true and honest weight of product to the consumer in the majority of cases.

In Canada, we have similar laws governing the weights and volumes of packaged products. These laws appear on the Department of Justice website. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is tasked with making sure that food manufacturers and those importing food products into Canada comply with these laws.

The next time that you are at the supermarket, you may want to check the labels of packaged foods imported from Europe. You may be surprised to see the “e” symbol on some of them.



Many packaged food products in Europe have an “e” associated with the weight of their contents