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Navigating Food Labels

by Lisa Raffensperger

(National Public Radio) Did you know the label "100 Percent Natural" has different meanings for chicken fingers, cookies and various other foods? Or that those "cage-free" chickens might not ever have seen the outdoors? Here's a guide to help sort out what's meaningful, what's dubious — and what's total fluff.



Organic

This is the gold standard among food-labeling terms. The National Organic Program is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and it permits the official organic seal only on products that meet strict requirements. In the United States, any manufacturer or marketer's claims of "organic" must be certified by an accredited third party.

* Crops — Certified organic crops generally cannot be produced using synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or genetically modified organisms, though some synthetic chemicals are allowed if they cannot be produced naturally and are not harmful.

* Livestock — Certified organic meat, milk and egg products must come from livestock raised without antibiotics or hormones. The livestock also must be fed organic food, not be genetically modified and be allowed access to outdoors. Products from animals that become sick and are given antibiotics cannot be considered organic.

* Other Food Products — There are different levels of organic labels:

- 100% Organic: Contains only organically produced ingredients (excluding water and salt). Can display the USDA organic seal.
- Organic: Contains 95 percent or more organically produced ingredients by weight or volume (excluding water and salt); all other ingredients must be on USDA's approved list. Can display the USDA seal.
- Made with Organic Ingredients: Contains 70% or more organically produced ingredients. Cannot display the USDA seal.

Natural

For meat and poultry, the "natural" label applies to how meat is processed — not how animals are raised. The USDA defines it to mean that meat and poultry must be only "minimally processed" and cannot contain any artificial flavoring, color ingredients, chemical preservatives or artificial ingredients.

Producers sometimes use the label to reflect that animals did not receive antibiotics or hormones. But this falls outside the USDA's definition and can vary by producer. If you want to know specifics about how animals were raised, cattle specialist Mike Baker at Cornell University says many producers spell out their guidelines on their Web sites. Such claims generally have not been verified by a third party, however.

In all other instances, "natural" is a largely meaningless labeling term. The USDA defines it only in regard to meat and poultry, so what it means on granola bars is anyone's guess.

Farmers who choose to use the label "Certified Naturally Grown" are required to conform to national organic standards, but use of the label is governed by a nonprofit rather than a governmental program. These claims are certified by other farmers rather than the USDA. This alternative may be one instance in which buying "natural" foods is a good bet.

Sustainable

"Sustainable" implies that farms are managed to benefit natural resources and the local economy, says Dr. Anu Rangarajan, director of Cornell University's Small Farms Program. But no government agency or official third party verifies the claim. Some independent groups — including the World Wildlife Fund and Core Values — have created sustainability standards and their seals may be displayed on products that meet these guidelines. Companies such as Unilever also have created an internally imposed standard for "sustainable" products. Consumers should look for a label that tells who is verifying the claim.

No Hormones Administered

"Hormone-free" is misleading, as all animal products naturally contain hormones. The USDA allows the label "no hormones administered" on meat or poultry products to designate that the animals did not receive added hormones during their lifetimes. The USDA already prohibits the use of hormones in pigs and chickens, so a "no hormones administered" label on pork or poultry doesn't mean the producer took special measures. On other meat, the manufacturer or marketer applies this term; it is not independently verified.

No Antibiotics Administered

The USDA doesn't approve the term "antibiotic-free" but does allow "no antibiotics administered" or "raised without antibiotics," which mean that an animal did not receive any antibiotics during the course of its lifetime. The claim is not independently verified.

Free Range

The USDA defines this to mean birds are allowed access to the outdoors for more than half their lives. However, just because the cage door was open doesn't mean the birds actually spent time outside. This claim is not independently verified.

Cage-Free

Both "cage-free" and "free roaming" are defined by the USDA to mean that birds can roam indoors, and don't guarantee that birds are allowed access to the outdoors. This claim is not independently verified.

Grass-Fed

Grass-fed animals produce meat that is higher in vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids and lower in fat than grain-fed animals. According to the USDA, the label means the animal consumed only grass or forage throughout its adult life, was fed no grain and had continuous access to pasture during the growing season. This claim is not independently verified.

Omega-3 Enhanced

In eggs, this USDA term means that the laying hens were fed a diet enriched with natural sources of omega-3 fatty acids, such as flaxseed. The FDA requires that the quantity of omega-3s per egg also be displayed on the label. But the amount of omega-3s can vary greatly among eggs and, in some cases, might not be much

more than the amount in a conventional egg (about 37 mg, according to the USDA's Nutrient Database).