

TAKE 2 WELLNESS

*A Health Coach Approach To Help You
Take Charge Of YOU*

Food Label Claims



Whether appearing on a package of eggs in your grocery store or listed on a menu in your favorite restaurant, words like “free-range,” “grass-fed,” “natural,” and “organic” are everywhere these days.

Many food labels can be confusing, so knowing what a food claim truly means is a great way to educate yourself about where your food comes from and how it has been produced. Below is a list of some common food claims.

New food label claims arise regularly, so if you come across a new phrase, be sure to take some time to do your own research and learn what it really means.

1. ANTIBIOTIC-FREE

“Antibiotic-free” means that an animal was not given antibiotics during its lifetime. Other phrases to indicate the same approach include “no antibiotics administered” and “raised without antibiotics.”

2. CAGE-FREE

“Cage-free” means that the birds are raised without cages. What this doesn’t explain is whether the birds were raised outdoors on pasture, if they had access to outside, or if they were raised indoors in overcrowded conditions. If you are looking to buy eggs, poultry, or meat that was raised outdoors, look for a label that says “pastured” or “pasture-raised.”

3. FAIR TRADE

The “fair trade” label means that farmers and workers, often in developing countries, have received a fair wage and worked in acceptable conditions while growing and packaging the product.

4. FREE-RANGE

The USDA for egg and poultry production only defines the use of the terms, “free-range” or “free-roaming”. The label can be used as long as the producers allow the poultry access to the outdoors so they are able to engage in natural behaviors. It does not necessarily mean that the products are cruelty-free, antibiotic-free, or that the animals spent the majority of their time outdoors. Claims are defined by the USDA, but are not verified by third-party inspectors.

5. GMO-FREE, NON-GMO, OR NO GMOs

Products can be labeled “GMO-free” if they are produced without being genetically engineered through the use of GMOs (genetically modified organisms). Genetic engineering is the process of transferring specific traits or genes from one organism into a different plant or animal.

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6. GRAIN-FED

Animals raised on a diet of grain are labeled “grain-fed.” Check the label for “100 Percent Vegetarian Diet” to ensure the animals were given feed containing no animal by-products.

7. GRASS-FED

This means the animal was fed grass rather than grain. They should not be supplemented with grain, animal by-products, synthetic hormones, or given antibiotics to promote growth or prevent disease, although they may have been given antibiotics to treat disease. A “grass-fed” label doesn’t mean the animal necessarily ate grass its entire life. Some grass-fed cattle are “grain-finished,” which means they ate grain from a feedlot prior to slaughter.

8. HEALTHY

Foods labeled “healthy” must be low in fat and saturated fat and contain limited amounts of cholesterol and sodium. Certain foods must also contain at least 10 percent of vitamins A or C, iron, calcium, protein, or fiber.

9. HERITAGE

A “heritage” label describes a rare and endangered breed of livestock and crops. Heritage animals are prized for their rich taste, and they usually contain a higher fat content than commercial breeds. These animals are considered purebreds and a specific breed near extinction. Production standards are not required by law; but true heritage farmers use sustainable production methods. This method of production saves animals from extinction and preserves genetic diversity.

10. HORMONE-FREE

The USDA has prohibited use of the term “hormone-free,” but animals that were raised without added growth hormones can be labeled “no hormones administered” or “no added hormones.” By law, hogs and poultry cannot be given any hormones. If the products are not clearly labeled, ask your farmer or butcher to ensure that the meats you are buying are free from hormones.

11. NATURAL

Currently, no standards exist for this label except when used on meat and poultry products. USDA guidelines state that “natural” meat and poultry products can only undergo minimal processing and cannot contain artificial colors, artificial flavors, preservatives, or other artificial ingredients. However, “natural” foods are not necessarily sustainable, organic, humanely raised, or free of hormones and antibiotics.

12. NON-IRRADIATED

This label means that the food has not been exposed to radiation. Meat and vegetables are sometimes irradiated to kill microorganisms and reduce the number of microbes present due to unsanitary practices. No thorough testing has been done to know if irradiated food is safe for human consumption.

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13. PASTURE-RAISED

“Pasture-raised” indicates that the animal was raised on a pasture and that it ate grasses and food found in a pasture, rather than being fattened on grain in a feedlot or barn. Pasturing livestock and poultry is a traditional farming technique that allows animals to be raised in a humane manner. This term is very similar to “grass-fed,” though the term “pasture-raised,” indicates more clearly that the animal was raised outdoors on pasture.

14. ORGANIC

All organic agricultural farms and products must meet the following guidelines (verified by a USDA-approved independent agency):

- Abstain from the application of prohibited materials (including synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and sewage sludge) for three years prior to certification and then continually throughout their organic license.
- Prohibit the use of genetically modified organisms and irradiation.
- Employ positive soil building, conservation, manure management, and crop rotation practices.
- Provide outdoor access and pasture for livestock.
- Refrain from antibiotic and hormone use in animals.
- Sustain animals on 100% organic feed.
- Avoid contamination during the processing of organic products.
- Keep records of all operations.

If a product contains the “USDA Organic” seal, it means that 95 to 100 percent of its ingredients are organic. Products with 70 to 95 percent organic ingredients can still advertise “organic” ingredients on the front of the package, and products with less than 70 percent organic ingredients can identify them on the side panel. Organic foods prohibit the use of hydrogenation and trans fats.

15. RBGH-FREE OR RBST-FREE RBGH

Recombinant bovine growth hormone is a genetically engineered growth hormone that is injected into dairy cows to artificially increase their milk production. The hormone has not been properly tested for safety. Milk labeled “rBGH-free” is produced by dairy cows that never received injections of this hormone. Organic milk is rBGH free. (rBST stands for recombinant bovine somatotropin.)

Adapted from www.sustainabletable.org