



# Understanding Food Label Claims

Super savvy shoppers (a.k.a health-conscious consumers) often find themselves standing in a grocery aisle, picking up product after product and puzzling over the labels.

*What, exactly, does “natural” mean? Should I choose free-range or cage-free? Is organic really a better option?*

Welcome to the confusing world of food label claims! Food manufacturers plaster claims on their packaging to sell their products. The labels they choose are what they want you to believe or know about what they're selling. Claims that promise things like: heart healthy, good for you, bone health, immune support, antioxidant plus, good source of fiber and excellent source of vitamins and minerals, don't have much regulatory oversight are extremely misleading.



But not all claims are bad...and some, especially those with the USDA stamp of approval, can help you make the best buying decisions. Just remember that the truth of a product always lives in the ingredient list...it's what's in the food (not what's on the box) that counts!

With that said, here's a breakdown of some of the most common (and more trustworthy) food claims.

## 1. Antibiotic-Free

This claim is most commonly seen on food from an animal that was not given antibiotics during its lifetime: “no antibiotics administered,” “raised without antibiotics” or “antibiotic-free.”

## 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 decent conditions while growing and packaging the product.

### **4. Free-Range**

The use of the terms “free range” or “free-roaming” are only defined by the USDA for egg and poultry production. 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.

### **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 one or more of vitamins A or C, iron, calcium, protein or fiber.

## **9. 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.

## **10. 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. Because there are no standards on this for other packaged foods, “All Natural” and “100% Natural” are used often, even when the product contains artificial ingredients.

## **11. Non-Irradiated**

This label means that the food has not been exposed to radiation. Meat and vegetables are sometimes irradiated to kill micro-organisms 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.

## **12. 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.

### **13. 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 3 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.

### **14. rBGH-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.

**NOTE:** New food label claims are added regularly, so if you come across a new phrase, be sure to take some time to research it and learn what it really means.