

FOOD LABEL CLAIMS

Whether on a package of eggs in your grocery store or 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 label truly means is a great way to educate yourself about where your food comes from and how it’s been produced. Below is a list of common food claims. There’s always new food label claims popping up, 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.

Antibiotic-Free

“Antibiotic-free” means an animal wasn’t given antibiotics during its lifetime. Other phrases to indicate the same thing include “no antibiotics administered” and “raised without antibiotics.”

Cage-Free

“Cage-free” means the birds were raised out of cages. What this doesn’t tell is whether the birds were raised outdoors on pasture or indoors in overcrowded conditions. If you eat eggs, poultry, or meat, look for “pastured” or “pasture-raised.”

Fair Trade

The “fair trade” label means farmers and workers, often in developing countries, have received fair wages and work in acceptable conditions.

Free-Range

“Free-range” and “free-roaming” on egg and poultry labels are only defined by the USDA. These labels can be used as long as the producers allow the birds some access to the outdoors. It doesn’t necessarily mean the products are cruelty-free or antibiotic-free, or that the animals spent the majority of their time outdoors. Claims are defined by the USDA, but aren’t verified by third-party inspectors.

GMO-Free, Non-GMO, or No GMOS

GMOs, genetically modified organisms, are plants or animals that have been genetically engineered with DNA from bacteria, viruses, or other plants and animals. Products can be labeled “GMO-free” if they’re produced without GMOs.

Grain-Fed

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

Grass-Fed

This means animals were fed grass, their natural diet, rather than grains. In addition to being more humane, grass-fed meat is leaner and lower in fat and calories than grain-fed meat. Grassfed animals are not fed grain, animal by-products, synthetic hormones, or antibiotics to promote growth or prevent disease – although they may be 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. Look for “grass-fed and grass-finished.”

Healthy

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

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Heritage

A “heritage” label describes a rare and endangered breed of livestock or crops. Heritage breeds are traditional livestock that were raised by farmers in the past, before industrial agriculture drastically reduced breed variety. These animals are prized for their rich taste, and they usually contain a higher fat content than commercial breeds. 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.

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 meats you’re buying aren’t clearly labeled, ask your farmer or butcher if they’re free of hormones.

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 can’t contain artificial colors or flavors, preservatives, or other artificial ingredients. However, “natural” foods aren’t necessarily sustainable, organic, humanely raised, or free of hormones and antibiotics.

Pasture-Raised

“Pasture-raised” indicates the animal was raised on a pasture where it was able to eat nutritious grass and other plants, 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. Animals are able to move around freely and behave naturally. This term is very similar to “grass-fed,” though the term “pasture-raised” indicates more clearly that the animal was raised outdoors on pasture.

Non-Irradiated

This label means the food hasn’t been exposed to radiation. Meat and vegetables are sometimes irradiated (exposed to radiation energy) to kill disease-causing bacteria and reduce the incidence of foodborne illness. No thorough testing has been done to know if irradiated food is safe for human consumption.

RBGH-Free or RBST-Free

Recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH), or recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST), is a genetically-engineered growth hormone that’s injected into dairy cows to artificially increase their milk production. The hormone hasn’t been properly tested for safety, and its use isn’t permitted in the European Union, Canada, and some other countries. Milk labeled “rBGH-Free” is produced by dairy cows that never received injections of this hormone. Organic milk is rBGH free.

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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 GMOs 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 95–100% of its ingredients are organic. Products with 70–95% organic ingredients can still advertise “organic ingredients” on the front of the package, and products with less than 70% organic ingredients can identify them on the side panel. Organic foods prohibit the use of hydrogenation and trans fats