

Q. What do those “healthy” food labels really mean?

A. If you’ve ever wondered what those “healthy” food labels mean at the grocery store, you’re not alone.

There’s lots of buzzwords and branding on food labels designed to get your attention. If it looks healthy, maybe you’ll toss it in your cart and be on your way. That’s what food manufacturers want you to think. But before you head to the checkout line, read the labels. You might be surprised to learn what they really mean.¹

Natural

Foods labeled “natural” don’t use man-made ingredients or preservatives.

- They don’t have added color.
- They don’t have fillers.
- And they aren’t processed much (if at all).

This means they are pretty close to the way they were when they were picked or prepared.

But “natural” can still be used on food labels even if antibiotics, growth hormones, or other chemicals are used.

All-Natural

Before you pay a little more money for something labeled “all-natural,” check the food label.



“All-Natural” isn’t a term used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Food companies made it up to help them sell more of their food to you. Foods labeled “natural” and “all-natural” may be the same.

Organic

Shopping for “organic” foods may help you find healthy choices.

Foods labeled “organic,” must have at least 95 percent organic ingredients, according to the USDA.

- Food producers that use “organic” on labels must meet federal laws.
- They must keep detailed records of what they do to a product and the steps they take to make it.
- They must also pass an inspection.

100% Organic

If a label says “100% organic,” it’s really more of a game plan to help a product sell.

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The rules for a “100% organic” label are the same as foods labeled “organic.”

- Five percent of the ingredients may not be organic.
- But the 5 percent does have to come from an approved list.

Made with Organic Ingredients

There are USDA rules for this label. Foods marked “made with organic ingredients” must be:

- Made up of at least 70 percent organic ingredients.

And here’s something that should give you comfort. Foods with this label can’t be made with “sewage sludge-based products or ionizing radiation.”

Sewage-sludge is often used to fertilize growing crops. Ionizing radiation is used to extend the shelf life of foods. Foods treated with this process must say so on the label.

If you want the best foods for your body, eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and legumes. When you shop for foods – whether fresh, frozen, canned, or boxed, read the label to make sure you’re making a healthy choice.

References

1. McEnvoy, M. (2019). Organic 101: What the USDA organic label means. U.S. Department of Agriculture. From: <https://tinyurl.com/1akekqow>