



6 Most Commonly Misunderstood Food Labels

1. Cage-free, Pasture-raised or Free-range
2. Certified Organic
3. Natural
4. Grass-fed
5. Hormone-free (rBGH-free, rBST-free)
6. Antibiotic-free

Cage-free, Pasture-raised or Free-range

"Cage-free" means the birds are raised without cages, but it tells you nothing about their living conditions.

"Pasture-raised" or "pastured" requires that the animals spent at least some time outdoors on pasture, feeding on grass or forage. This traditional farming method is not generally as cost effective (therefore raising the price of your eggs and poultry) and is typically done on a smaller scale than conventional factory-farmed animals. However, there are no government standards for this label, including how much of its life the animal spent on pasture.

"Free-range" labels are regulated by the USDA only for poultry produced for meat- meaning the free-range sticker slapped on your carton of eggs means absolutely nothing. Nor are the requirements very high; in fact, the label can be used as long as the animal has some access to the outdoors each day- if even for a few minutes. It does not assure that the animal ever actually went outdoors to roam freely.

Demystifying Food Labels

Certified Organic

Right now the most regulated label on your food, in terms of upholding specific government requirements, is the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic seal.

USDA Certified Organic Standards

- Organic crops prohibit the use of synthetic fertilizers, synthetic pesticides or sewage sludge.
- Organic crops cannot be genetically engineered or irradiated.
- Animals must eat only organically grown feed (without animal byproducts) and can't be treated with synthetic hormones or antibiotics.
- Animals must have access to the outdoors, and ruminants (hoofed animals, including cows) must have access to pasture.
- Animals cannot be cloned.

Natural

The label natural is really more of a marketing ploy than anything else. According to the USDA, "natural" meat and poultry products cannot contain artificial colors or flavors, preservatives or other artificial ingredients. However, this label fails to mention how the animals were raised, what they were fed, if antibiotics or hormones were used, or other aspects of production that consumers might logically expect from something labeled "natural."

Demystifying Food Labels

Grass-fed

"Grass-fed" means that, after weaning, an animal's primary source of food comes from grass or forage, not from grains such as corn.

For the record cows, goats, lamb and bison are all designed to eat grass, not corn.

"Grass-fed" does not tell you if antibiotics or hormones were used on the animal or what conditions it lived in.

Hormone-free

The labels, "raised without added hormones," "no hormones administered" or "no synthetic hormones" all mean that the animal received no synthetic hormones. Hormone-free labels do not disclose what the animals were fed or if they had access to pasture.

Federal law prohibits the use of hormones on pigs and poultry. Any hormone-free label on pork and poultry products is intended to mislead the shopper into paying more.

Federal regulations do permit the use of hormones in beef and dairy cattle. The bovine growth hormone commonly referred to as rBGH or rBST is a synthetic growth hormone often injected into dairy cattle to increase milk production. Several hormones are used in the majority of commercial cattle farms to speed up growth.

Demystifying Food Labels

Antibiotic-free

"Raised without antibiotics" or "no antibiotics administered" means that the animal received no antibiotics over its lifetime. Often commercial farmers administer low doses to their animals in order to promote growth and prevent disease. Keep in mind these antibiotics are linked to the spread of harmful, antibiotic-resistant bacteria.



Mini Cheat Sheet

BEEF	Reach for grass-fed, raised without the use of antibiotics or growth hormones.
POULTRY + EGGS	Choose certified organic, pasture-raised varieties.
PORK	Reach for organic, antibiotic and nitrate-free varieties. Don't pay more for "hormone-free" labels.
SEAFOOD	Support sustainably sourced, preferably wild-caught.
DAIRY	Choose organic, whole milk from grass-fed dairy cows raised without the use of antibiotics or growth hormones.