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Grocery-aisle gotchas

Don't fall for marketing terms that sound like health promises

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Just as you can't judge a book by its cover, you can't always make assumptions about food based on its packaging. Labels don't just inform, they sell. So while the front of a package might truthfully call out "0 grams trans fat" in bold lettering, you'd have to check the fine print on the back to find out whether the item was loaded with saturated fat.

We've put together a guide to some of the most confusing label claims. We've also looked at new labeling rules and trends that can make it easier for you to choose among products. And because food labeling still has a long way to go, we offer our take on what should be on a label—but sometimes isn't.

"Organic"

This Department of Agriculture logo and certain other organic symbols from accredited certifying organizations are usually meaningful because the government sets fixed standards for them. You'll find three tiers of organic labeling: "100% organic" (only organic ingredients), "organic" (at least 95 percent of ingredients are organic), or "made with organic ingredients" (at least 70 percent organic contents). Water and salt don't count toward the percentage of organic ingredients.

Any nonorganic ingredient must come from an approved national list. But "organic" might not mean much when it comes to fish, since proposed government regulations would allow the term to be used for fish raised in a highly polluted environment and fed meal made from wild fish, which could be contaminated with mercury, PCBs, and other pollutants. For more information on organic foods and a list of certified symbols, go to Consumer Reports Greener Choices Eco-Labels Center.

"Natural"

This "natural" bottled tea contains high-fructose corn syrup, a highly processed form of sugar. Surprised? You're not alone. The vast majority of respondents to a 2007 Consumer Reports National Research Center poll said that they expected "natural" foods and drinks to be free of artificial or highly processed ingredients. But the Food and Drug Administration does not officially define the term "natural." And when it comes to meat, consumers expect "natural" to mean that it comes from animals that were raised without drugs or chemicals. But "natural" meat could come from animals fed hormones and antibiotics. That's because while the USDA does regulate the use of the term for meat and poultry, the current rule pertains only to how the cut of meat was processed, not to how the animal was raised or what it ate.

Whole grains

These buns, which are "made with whole grain," have enriched bleached flour as their first ingredient and provide only 1 gram of fiber per slice. A good choice in bread would list "whole wheat" as the first ingredient and should provide at least twice that much fiber plus all the extra nutrients found in the wheat bran. In other products, look for those with labels that say they contain "100 percent whole grain" or "100 percent whole wheat." If you want to know the whole truth, check the ingredients list: refined white flour (aka enriched wheat flour, unbleached wheat flour, or just wheat flour) should not appear on the list at all or show up only near the end.

"Cage free" or "free range"

The USDA doesn't regulate the use of the term "cage free" at all. And it uses "free range" only for poultry, not other meat or eggs. Even for chicken, the term doesn't mean much—5 minutes of open-air access daily is all it takes to qualify.

Health ratings

Logos such as the American Heart Association's heart check mark are supposed to help consumers quickly identify healthful choices. While in theory those marks make it easier to find products that meet certain nutritional standards, the different labeling used by manufacturers and grocery chains makes it hard to comparison shop.

Things might get simpler this spring when many companies begin to adopt Smart Choices, a program developed by a coalition of scientists, public-health officials, and food-industry representatives. The program's symbol will include a check mark to indicate that a product meets specific nutritional criteria for foods in that category and will list the calories per serving and the number of servings in a package. And with our review of breakfast cereals, *Consumer Reports* began adding nutrient Ratings to some of our articles on packaged foods to take with you when you go to the grocery store.

"Made with" or "made from"

Those terms are virtually meaningless since they don't say how much of an ingredient was used or what happened to it during processing. For example, these sandwich crackers do indeed contain "real cheddar cheese," but it shows up far down on the ingredient list, after partially hydrogenated vegetable oil and sugar.

Serving size

A quick glance at the label of this trail mix shows a fairly reasonable fat and calorie count, but check the serving size. The 3-ounce package supposedly feeds three. If, like most people, you're not inclined to share, you'll wind up consuming nearly 500 calories and 30 grams of fat.

A few food makers now print "per package" nutrition facts on products such as chips or drinks that one person will often consume in one sitting—but most don't. So make sure that you always double-check.

Health claims

The oats in Cheerios might indeed help some people modestly lower their cholesterol levels. And the government often allows such health claims as long as there's a disclaimer on the label describing the evidence. But many consumers never get around to reading the fine print.

In this case it says that the evidence for the cereal's benefit comes from a study showing that consuming two servings of Cheerios a day can help when it's part of a diet that's also low in saturated fat and cholesterol. The lesson here: Don't read too much into a manufacturer's health claims.

Nutritional claims

How did partially hydrogenated vegetable oil wind up on the ingredients list of this popcorn, which is supposed to contain no trans fats? The FDA allows products to be labeled as containing "0 g trans fat" if they have less than 0.5 grams per serving. That's not a lot, but it can add up, especially if you eat several servings.

The real key to what's in a product is the ingredients list, which arranges components in descending weight order.

What should be on a label (but often isn't)

Consumers want to know where their food comes from, what's in it, and what was done to it before it hit the store, according to a telephone survey of 1,001 adults conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center in October 2008. At least three-quarters of the respondents strongly agreed that food labels should be required or, in some cases, allowed to provide the following information. We agree.

Whether beef has been tested for mad-cow disease by manufacturers. The Department of Agriculture tests only one-tenth of 1 percent of slaughtered cattle for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad-cow disease). Yet the agency prohibits meatpacking companies from testing and labeling on their own, even though they would use the same rapid test kit used by the agency. We think that's unreasonable.

The country of origin of processed or packaged foods. The USDA recently extended Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) to all meats, fish, poultry, and produce sold in retail stores. That makes it easier to buy food from trusted locations and to avoid foods from certain areas if a safety problem is identified. Unfortunately, meat and fish from butcher shops and fish markets are exempt from the labeling law, as are processed foods, including dried fruits, and mixtures, such as packaged salads and trail mixes.

Whether food products are made from genetically engineered or cloned animals. The Food and Drug Administration does not require such labeling on the engineered plant foods already available. And it does not plan to label meat from genetically engineered animals, which will be hitting the market soon, or from clones, which are probably already here. We think people should know if their meat contains material from entirely different species—mouse genes, for example, in your pork chops. And they should know if their meat or dairy products come from cloned animals.

Whether meat has been treated with carbon monoxide. Meats treated with the gas can look fresh well past the point of spoilage, according to a 2006 *Consumer Reports* test of ground beef and steak. On some products, labeling alerts consumers not to use color as a guide to freshness, but often carbon monoxide-treated meat is not labeled.

Whether milk and milk products were produced from animals raised without artificial growth hormones. Several states are considering laws to prohibit dairies from labeling their milk "No rbGH." We think those laws are a bad idea. That growth hormone increases milk output but also increases udder infections in cows and levels of insulin-like growth factor-1(IGF-1) in milk. IGF-1 stimulates tumor growth, but whether there is enough in milk to affect human health is unclear.