

KNOW YOUR FOOD LABELS

Growing Conditions

Organic

If a product bears a "USDA organic" label, you are guaranteed that it's at least 95% free of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers and sewage sludge and that it hasn't been genetically modified or irradiated. No hormones or antibiotics are allowed; animals must be fed organically-grown feed and have access to the outdoors. While some experts have suggested that organic foods are healthier than conventionally-grown, the USDA doesn't support these claims.

Sustainable

Sustainable agriculture refers to crops that are raised in ways that don't harm the environment, are humane to animals, and that supports farm workers and farming communities. Not all sustainable foods are organic — most come from small family farms which may not have the time or resources to get organic certification (it is expensive and time-consuming). A related label is "Fair Trade," which certifies that farmers in developing countries have received a fair price for products like coffee that are grown in a sustainable way.

Natural

Natural refers to meat and poultry that contains no artificial flavors, colors or preservatives. There is no certification and because a food is called "natural," it doesn't mean that farm animals were raised organically.

Locally Grown

Locally grown refers to crops produced no more than 250 miles from where they're purchased. The emphasis is on seasonal, fresh produce, meats and dairy products but these crops may have been raised with pesticides.

If the label does not specify that the food has any special growing conditions, you should assume it's conventional. Crops and cattle are raised using synthetic chemicals, like fertilizers and pesticides to curb insect growth and increase the amount of food produced. Farmers can give their animals antibiotics, growth hormones and other medications. This is the way most crops and livestock have been raised in the U.S. for the past 50 years.

Hormones and Antibiotics

Antibiotic-Free

The term "antibiotic-free" is unregulated but producers can label foods "no antibiotics administered" or "raised without antibiotics," which means animals were raised entirely without the substances. Concerns have been raised that antibiotic use in cattle causes antibiotic resistant bacteria to develop, threatening human health.

Hormone-Free

For pork and chicken, the label "hormone free" is meaningless; these substances are banned when raising pigs and chickens. Beef may carry a "no hormones administered" label but no outside authority currently certifies this claim. Controversy has arisen over the artificial hormone rBGH which increases milk production. The U.S. is one of the few countries to approve its use; others have banned it because of concerns over human and animal health.

Animal Welfare

Free Range

Chickens that aren't confined to cages and are granted access to the outdoors are called "free range." But the USDA only requires limited outdoor time; conditions can be crowded and dirty and there's no outside monitoring.

Grass-Fed

Cattle raised largely on grass and hay are referred to as "grass-fed." No government regulations or inspections apply to the term and these cattle may not be organic. Since cows' stomachs more easily digest grass than grain, it is a more natural, humane and antibiotic-free way to raise cattle.

- A "100% organic" label means the product is entirely organic.
- An "organic" label means the product ingredients are at least 95% organic.
- A "made with/contains organic ingredients" means the ingredients are at least 70% organic.
- An "all natural" claim means zilch. (Yup, you read that right.)