

# How Much Do Labels Really Tell You?

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**W**hich eggs should I buy for my family — “cage free” “free range” or “natural”? What about beef — “organic,” “hormone free,” or “grass fed”? If you feel overwhelmed by the growing number of labels on meat and dairy products in grocery stores, you are not alone. Driven by consumers' growing concern about food safety, the food industry is labeling its products with more and more claims about how it produces what we eat.

Unfortunately, not all labels are created equal. The increasingly abundant information and claims on food labels should help us navigate the maze of choices, but, in reality, they often leave us wondering just how to sort it all out. This guide is designed to help by going behind the scenes to explain what these labels really tell you (or don't tell you).

Before we get into specifics about the different labels you see on meat, dairy and eggs, here are a few general recommendations:

- **Some labels describe one aspect of meat or dairy products (“cage free”) while others make multiple claims, typically through a certification program (“organic”). The only government certification is the U.S. Department of Agriculture organic seal.** Although private programs also certify meat and dairy products, the quality of their standards can vary. For example, some private animal welfare certifications are operated by advocacy organizations that select advisory boards to establish detailed standards, while other animal welfare labels are less forthcoming about the basis for their label. This variation means that consumers have to do their homework in order to distinguish between food produced using sustainable methods and products of industrial agriculture that might be trying to cash in on consumers' good intentions.

So if a grocery chain or food brand claims that its product is approved by some agency or meets some impressive-sounding standard, go to the company's website and look for more information. Find out who sponsors the certifying agency and consider potential

conflicts of interest with the funding sources. Look to see if the standards are well explained. If not, contact the customer service department and request the certification criteria.

- **In addition to researching labels, it's important to prioritize which aspects of meat, dairy and egg production are most important to you.** Do you care about animal welfare, antibiotic and hormone use, access to pasture, farm size, food miles, labor standards or all of the above? Look for the labels that will guide you to products that best match your priorities. This may not result in the perfect product that meets all of your ideals, but it should help you minimize the paralysis that results from label-reading overload.
- **A few pieces of information are common to all meat, dairy and egg product packaging:**
  - ▶ All USDA-inspected meat and poultry (the vast majority of the meat in grocery stores) should have a USDA seal of inspection and a code for the producing establishment.



(from left) USDA inspection marks for carcasses, meat products and poultry.

- ▶ Many meat and egg labels have a grade (such as USDA Grade A beef or Jumbo eggs). This is a quality ranking performed by USDA employees or by company employees under USDA supervision. Product grades give information about the quality and size of the product, not how it was produced.

This guide divides common labels for meat, dairy and eggs into three categories according to how much information they provide.

## Labels That Tell You a Lot — Both Good and Bad

The majority of labeling confusion could be avoided if the government established labeling requirements and certified



that producers met the standards before the label could be used. But to date, the USDA organic seal is the only label for meat, dairy and eggs with that level of government involvement.

The **USDA Organic** seal is one label to look for. For a product to wear the green USDA organic seal, it must meet the following standards:

- Crops cannot be grown using synthetic fertilizers, synthetic chemicals or sewage sludge.
- Crops cannot be genetically modified or irradiated.
- Animals must be fed only organically grown feed (without animal byproducts) and cannot be treated with synthetic hormones or antibiotics.
- Animals must have access to the outdoors, and ruminants (hoofed animals) must have access to pasture. (The enforcement of this standard is actually the subject of much controversy within the organic movement, especially for dairy cows.)
- Animals cannot be cloned.

One label to look for — and avoid buying products with it — is **“Treated With Irradiation.”** In retail stores, food that has been irradiated must be labeled and marked with a radura symbol. Unfortunately, this labeling policy does not apply to restaurants, schools, hospitals or processed foods containing irradiated ingredients.



The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the agency responsible for labeling irradiated food, has been under intense industry pressure to weaken labeling rules and allow the use of “pasteurization” in place of “irradiation.” In 2007, the FDA announced a proposal to make this change, but as of early 2008 the agency had not yet changed the

rules. For now, the irradiation label is one that clearly alerts consumers of foods to avoid. For reasons to oppose food irradiation, visit [foodandwaterwatch.org/food/irradiation](http://foodandwaterwatch.org/food/irradiation).

## Labels That Tell You A Little

Many labels describe only one aspect of how a meat or dairy product was produced. Unlike USDA organic, which encompasses a number of different issues about how the animal was raised, these labels are generally not based on the same kind of certification program to verify the claims. Depending upon what aspects of food production concern you most, these labels may be sufficient. But be careful not to assume that they provide information about anything other than the one practice the labels describe.

**“Cage Free”** indicates that birds are raised without cages, but it does not describe any other living conditions. For instance, cage-free eggs could have come from birds raised indoors, in overcrowded conditions, and without access to pasture. The USDA has not developed any standards for this label.

**“Pasture-raised”** or **“Pastured”** indicates that animals were raised on pasture, feeding on grass or forage. This traditional farming method is typically done on a smaller scale than conventionally produced animals. The USDA has not developed any standards for this label, including how much of its life the animal spent on pasture.

In 2007, the USDA approved a standard for a **“Grass-fed”** label for meat (not dairy). The standard states that, aside from milk consumed prior to weaning, animals must receive 100 percent of their energy from grass or forage and cannot be fed grains such as corn. The standard requires that animals have continuous access to pasture, but only during the growing season. During the off-season, animals may be kept indoors and fed harvested grass or forage. The label does not tell you if antibiotics or hormones were administered.

**“Raised Without Antibiotics”** or **“No Antibiotics Administered”** indicates that no antibiotics were used over the animal’s lifetime. Some large-scale producers feed animals antibiotics at low doses to promote growth and prevent disease, which may be linked to the spread of antibiotic-



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resistant bacteria in the environment. Other producers use antibiotics only to treat sick animals. Regardless, if an animal receives antibiotics for any reason, its meat, milk or eggs cannot be labeled “organic” or “raised without antibiotics.” The no-antibiotics labels do not tell you anything about what the animals were fed, or if they had access to pasture, and USDA has not developed any standards for this label.

The labels “**Raised Without Added Hormones**,” “**No Hormones Administered**” or “**No Synthetic Hormones**” indicate that no synthetic hormones were given to animals. Federal law prohibits the use of hormones on hogs and poultry. The use of any hormone-free label on pork and poultry products is intended to mislead consumers into thinking that the product is different and therefore worthy of a higher price. The USDA requires that use of these labels on pork or poultry include the disclaimer: “Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones in poultry/pork.”

However, in the case of beef and dairy cattle, federal regulations do permit the use of hormones. Recombinant bovine growth hormone (also known as rBGH or rBST) is a synthetic growth hormone injected into dairy cattle to increase milk production. Several hormones are used for growth promotion in beef cattle.

“**rBGH-free**” or “**rBST-free**” labels are increasingly used on milk products to indicate that synthetic hormones were not given to the dairy cattle. However, starting in 2007, pressure from Monsanto, the manufacturer of the artificial hormone, led several state agriculture departments and state legislatures to try to restrict the use of this label. It took several years of grassroots efforts and lawsuits to block the attempted restrictions on rBGH-free labels.

Many people notice that the “rBGH-free” label on dairy products is usually accompanied by a disclaimer that the FDA acknowledges no difference between milk produced with or without the hormone. For more information about the legal maneuvering and industry influence that led to that disclaimer, visit [foodandwaterwatch.org/reports/rbgh-how-artificial-hormones-damage-the-dairy-industry-and-endanger-public-health](http://foodandwaterwatch.org/reports/rbgh-how-artificial-hormones-damage-the-dairy-industry-and-endanger-public-health).

Hormone-free labels do not disclose what the animals were fed or if they had access to pasture. The USDA has not developed standards for the “Raised without Added Hormones” and “No Hormones Administered” labels for beef products.

The “**Kosher**” label indicates that the food products were certified by a kosher certification organization (comprising of Rabbis and field supervision specialists) and produced in accordance with Jewish Law. Kosher certification involves the inspection of slaughterhouses, processing facilities and food ingredients to ensure kosher standards. Kosher certifying organizations also indicate whether the product is fleishig (meat), milchig (dairy) or pareve (neither meat nor dairy), as the separation of meat and dairy is important in the Kosher diet. The label does not tell you anything about

what the animals were fed or if they had access to pasture. USDA does not verify use of the Kosher label.

The “**Halal**” label is found on products certified by a Halal certification agency, and produced and handled according to Islamic law, under Islamic authority. Halal certification involves the inspection of food preparation practices, processing facilities, and food ingredients to ensure that Halal standards were met. The label does not reveal anything about what the animals were fed or if they had access to pasture. The USDA does not verify use of the “Halal” label.



## Misleading Labels

Some labels tell very little about the product, or they try to hype something that is already required by law. Food companies use these labels to convince consumers to spend more for products that are essentially the same as their competition.

“**Raised Without Added Hormones**” labels are misleading when placed on **pork** or **poultry**. Federal law prohibits the use of hormones for hogs and poultry. The use of hormone-free labels on pork and poultry products intentionally misleads consumers by claiming that the product is different and therefore worthy of a higher price.

According to USDA, “**Natural**” meat and poultry products cannot contain artificial colors, artificial flavors, preservatives or other artificial ingredients, and they should be minimally processed. However, “Natural” does not tell us 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.”

Another variation that is also misleading is “**Naturally Raised**.” In 2009, USDA released standards for this voluntary claim that are so weak that the label could allow consumers to be misled. The USDA proposal for naturally raised requires three things: that the animal be given no



growth promoters, no antibiotics and no food containing animal byproducts. Missing from the requirements is any mention of animal welfare — whether animals are confined in factory farms, whether gestation crates or other cruel practices are used and whether any environmental or conservation issues are addressed on the farm.

The label “**Fresh**” is used on poultry to indicate that the meat was not cooled below 26 degrees Fahrenheit (six degrees below freezing). Poultry does not have to be labeled as “frozen” until it reaches zero degrees. USDA meat inspectors monitor the use of this label to ensure that the standards are met. But this can be misleading to customers who presume that “fresh” implies that meat has not been frozen, processed or preserved in any way. The USDA does not define or regulate the use of this label on any other type of meat or dairy products.

“**Free Range**” is a label regulated by the USDA only for poultry produced for meat (not eggs). The label can be used if the animal had some access to the outdoors each day for some unspecified period of time (it could be just a few minutes). It does not assure that the animal ever actually went outdoors to roam freely. “Free range” is not regulated for pigs, cattle or egg-producing chickens.

## Before You Hit the Grocery Store

1. Rank your priorities. Are you most concerned about animal welfare, antibiotic and hormone use, animal feed, access to pasture, family farm vs. agribusiness, labor standards, how far the food traveled, or something else entirely? You may not be able to find the perfect product that meets all of your ideals, but you can minimize the paralysis that results from label-reading overload by prioritizing which is the most important to you.
2. If you can't find products that fit your list of requirements at the grocery store, get creative by buying local and direct from the farmer. Buying direct means that you don't have to rely on labels and packaging to tell you how the animals were raised — you can ask the person who raised them. There are a growing number of ways to buy direct from producers:

- [Eatwellguide.org](http://Eatwellguide.org) provides listings of where to find sustainably produced meat and dairy products.
- [Sustainabletable.org](http://Sustainabletable.org) has lists of questions to ask producers about how they raise their animals.
- [Search.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets](http://Search.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets) is a search tool provided by the USDA to help consumers find a farmers market in their area. As the demand increases, more farmers markets are starting to carry meat, dairy and eggs produced locally, usually by small farmers.

### For more information:

WEB: [www.foodandwaterwatch.org](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org)

E-MAIL: [info@fwwatch.org](mailto:info@fwwatch.org)

PHONE: (202) 683-2500 (DC) • (415) 293-9900 (CA)

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