

Don't Get Scammed! How to Read Organic Food Labels

As society moves towards healthier food options, there is one group of people getting left in the dust: the companies who *aren't* supplying foods based on natural ingredients.

As a result, many companies are looking for creative ways to make their products seem healthier than they are. This inventive–yet misleading–marketing effort has led to a lot of food label confusion.

Let's take a look at some of the basic terms surrounding organic purchases. To avoid food label scams, know what is involved in the production process. Organic foods tend to be more expensive, so you want to make sure you are getting exactly what you bargained for.

A General Explanation of Organic

Any food that is labeled organic was raised or grown in accordance with government regulations. Both the facility and practices are monitored.

No pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, or sewage are used to grow organic produce. The animals that are used for organic foods (like beef, poultry, pork, etc.) do not receive antibiotics or growth hormones.

Only foods that are labeled organic adhere to these government standards. Other popular terms–like all natural–aren't regulated.

Within the classification of organic, there are three different levels.

- **Made with Organic Ingredients** – These foods are composed

of 70% organic ingredients. The remaining, non-organic ingredients are still closely monitor (for example, GMOs aren't allowed).

- **Organic** – This classification allows organic producers a little leeway. For example, a non-organic casing might be used for an organic sausage. This means non-traditional products can still be used if there isn't a natural alternative. Only 95% of the ingredients must be organic.
- **100% Organic** – This is technically the only food label option that ensures a totally organic experience.

Understanding Organic Milk

The organic labeling requirements for milk mostly pertain to the cows that produce it.

- At least 30% of the cow's diet must be grass (free-range grazing).
- The cows must be allowed to graze for at least 120 days.
- Any feed the cows eat must be vegetarian, meaning there can't be any animal byproducts.
- The cows must not receive antibiotics or growth hormones.

Very few cows are given hormones. But there are milks that are especially marked hormone-free. If you are looking for a cost-effective organic alternative, hormone-free might be your best bet.

Understanding Organic Poultry

There are a ton of terms that apply to organic and natural poultry. To avoid a scam, know your ultimate goal. Are you worried about animal rights? Is buying the healthiest food your main objective?

We'll start with the biggest scam-worthy labels and work

towards the most honest, healthy, and animal friendly products.

- **Free Range** – Any poultry product that is labeled free range might sound like an animal-friendly, healthy option; however, it is pretty misleading. Free range animals are still kept inside—sometimes in cages. They just have access to the outdoors.
- **All Natural** – Again, this is another easy scam people fall for. Almost all poultry products are natural. US poultry producers are not allowed to give hormones or steroids to the birds. Therefore, paying extra for “all natural” is totally unnecessary.
- **Organic** – Birds are still raised in a factory farm situation, but the density is far less than traditional poultry farms. Birds only dine on organic (vegetarian) feed—no animal byproducts are allowed.
- **Pasture Raised** – These animals are raised outside, away from the large-scale production barns. They eat whatever they can find—bugs, grass, etc.

Understanding Organic Eggs

While we are on the subject of poultry, let's move right along to eggs. If you aren't careful, you can easily fall for a labeling scam here. The biggest issue to consider is your stance on animal cruelty.

- **Organic** – The birds that produce these eggs are not caged, but they are kept in a large barn. They have access to the outdoors, but there aren't regulations that dictate the duration of their fresh air. Lastly, these birds are subjected to beak cutting and forced molting (through starvation).
- **Free Range** – Like organic egg-laying birds, free range animals simply need access to the outdoors. Again, there isn't a rule about how much time.

- **Cage Free** – This sounds like a pretty sweet deal for a bird, but it isn't as great as you'd like it to be. Animals aren't in cages, but they *are* inside without outdoor access.
- **Certified Humane** – These animals aren't caged, but they do spend their lives inside. While there *are* rules regarding the number of birds in a barn and the availability of perches or nesting boxes, forced molting *is* allowed.
- **Animal Welfare Approved** – This buying option is the best all-around solution—it's healthy and animal friendly. Animals aren't kept in cages and always have access to the outdoors. Animals are allowed to engage in normal bird behaviors (beak cutting and forced molting doesn't happen).

Understanding Organic Meat

When it comes to purchasing organic meat, there are really only three labels you should even consider buying.

- **Organic** – All organic meat comes from animals that were allowed to graze for at least 120 days. Also, the animals do not receive antibiotics.
- **Grass Fed** – The stomachs of most livestock were designed to digest grass. Other feeding options are more difficult for the animal's body to process. That means a meat product made from grass fed animals is healthier and more natural.
- **100% Grass Fed** – Look for labels that specify the animal had unlimited access to pasture and abstained from consuming other feed options.

Don't Get Scammed!

You owe it to your health, the animal's health, and your wallet to make sure the foods you buy are exactly what you

expect.

If you want help finding healthy products, check the database of organic suppliers available at Eat Wild.

If you do come across an intentionally misleading or dishonest label, consider taking action.

- eConsumerServices might be able to help get your money back if you were a victim of a food labeling scam.
- You can also file a claim with the USDA if you find a compliance or enforcement issue.

Have you ever been scammed by a misleading organic food label? Were you irritated by the health violation or the animal cruelty posing as humane?

Sources:

- *How to Read Egg Carton Labels* by The Humane Society of The United States
- *How do I know if something is organic?* by Organic.org
- *National Organic Program* by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service