

A photograph of three women in a grocery store aisle. The woman on the left has dark curly hair and is holding a jar of jam. The woman in the center has long blonde hair and is pointing at a label on a box. The woman on the right has long dark hair and is also looking at a box. The background shows shelves of products and overhead lights.

The 10 Words on Food Labels That Are Lying to You

By [Amy Hartshorn](#)

Are You Being Tricked by “Healthy” Food Labels?

When it comes to food marketing, what you see is **not always what you get**. Many popular label claims are designed to sound clean, wholesome, and safe—when they’re anything but. This quick-reference guide will help you **spot the top red flags**, so you can shop smarter, protect your health, and avoid getting duped by greenwashed language.


1. **Natural:**

One of the most misleading terms in food labeling.

It has no legal definition when it comes to processed foods in the U.S.

It does not mean: Organic Non-GMO Free of additives or chemicals

Products labeled “natural” may still contain: GMOs Pesticide residues Artificial preservatives or flavorings, Factory-farmed animal products

 Don’t be fooled—“natural” is marketing, not regulation.

2. **Free Range (Poultry & Eggs):**

May only require minimal outdoor access. Look for third-party certifications.

This term sounds idyllic, but the USDA’s definition is weak:

The animal must have access to the outdoors—but that could mean a small door to a tiny concrete lot.

There is no requirement for time spent outdoors, quality of life, or space per bird.

And for eggs: Free-range hens may still be confined indoors for most of their lives.

No guarantee of organic feed, no antibiotics, or humane practices.

✔ Want better? Look for Pasture-Raised + Certified Humane or Animal Welfare Approved.

3. Wild Caught:

Sounds pristine—but this label can be misleading without transparency on how, where, and what was caught.

“Wild-caught” simply means the fish wasn’t raised in a farm—it doesn’t guarantee sustainability, cleanliness, or safety.

Some wild fisheries are heavily polluted due to mercury, PFAS, dioxins, and plastic contamination in oceans, lakes, or rivers.

The label doesn’t reveal fishing methods, which may involve: Destructive trawling that harms ocean ecosystems Overfishing of endangered species Bycatch (killing of non-target species like turtles, dolphins, or seabirds)

✓ Look for “Wild-Caught + MSC Certified” (Marine Stewardship Council) or check sourcing apps like Seafood Watch for sustainable, traceable options. And whenever possible, know your fisher—local, small-scale harvesters tend to use cleaner, more ethical methods than global supply chains.



4. No Added Hormones:

Sounds reassuring—but often used as a marketing gimmick on products where hormones are already legally prohibited.

Hormones are banned in poultry and pork production in the U.S., so “No Hormones Added” on chicken or turkey is meaningless—it’s just there to make the product look healthier.

Hormones are allowed in conventional beef and dairy, but the claim “no added hormones” doesn’t guarantee hormone-free—look for “raised without synthetic hormones” or certified organic for stronger protections.

Even when hormones aren’t added, conventional livestock may still be treated with antibiotics, fed GMOs, and raised in inhumane conditions.

✓ Certified Organic meat and dairy products prohibit synthetic hormones, antibiotics, and GMOs—offering the cleanest, most humane option.

5. Made with Whole Grains:

This label sounds healthy—but it's often just marketing spin.

Products can carry this claim even if they're made mostly from refined white flour, with only a token amount of whole grains added.

The actual percentage of whole grains isn't required to be disclosed—so you could be getting 95% processed flour and only 5% whole grain.

This label often shows up on highly processed foods like sugary cereals, granola bars, crackers, or bread that still spike blood sugar and contain additives.

✓ Don't fall for the front-of-package hype. Check the ingredients—look for “100% whole wheat” or “100% whole grain” as the first ingredient.

4. MSG and Its Aliases

Monosodium glutamate can trigger headaches, inflammation, and even neurological symptoms in sensitive people—but food companies rarely label it clearly.

Common disguises include: yeast extract, hydrolyzed protein (corn, soy, wheat), autolyzed yeast, soy protein isolate, textured protein, flavoring or seasoning

Watch for anything “hydrolyzed” or “autolyzed.”



7. Carrageenan

All carrageenan is derived from seaweed—but not all carrageenan is benign.

Here's the breakdown:

1. Food-grade carrageenan Comes from red seaweed (like *Chondrus crispus*, aka Irish moss)
Is extracted using alkaline processing Approved for use in organic food (but controversial)
2. Degraded carrageenan (aka poligeenan) Created through acid processing Not allowed in food due to its strong link to gut inflammation, ulcers, and tumor promotion in animal studies Technically different—but...

The Problem: Even so-called “food-grade” carrageenan has been shown to:

Trigger gut inflammation and immune responses


Break down into poligeenan under certain conditions (like stomach acid or long-term storage)

Be indistinguishable on an ingredient label—no one tells you what processing was used.

Food-grade carrageenan can become degraded carrageenan through acidic conditions (like your stomach) Or high heat and time (think shelf life, sterilization processes)

The result? A partial transformation that may expose consumers to poligeenan-like compounds without it ever being listed on the label.

Independent research—including by Dr. Joanne Tobacman—has repeatedly shown that even undegraded carrageenan can cause harm to the digestive tract.

 **Bottom Line:** Even though it's “natural” and derived from seaweed, carrageenan is best avoided, especially if you: Have IBS, Crohn's, or gut sensitivities Are healing your microbiome Want to reduce hidden inflammatory triggers

 Look for unsweetened almond, oat, and coconut milks without carrageenan, and check yogurts, ice creams, and even organic deli meats.

8. Non-GMO:

While a helpful start, “Non-GMO” doesn't mean organic, pesticide-free, or even healthy.

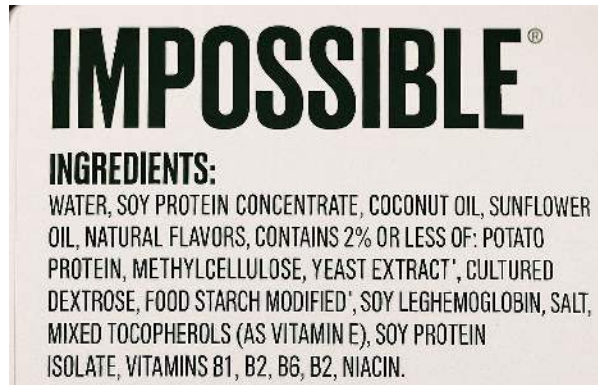
Non-GMO crops can still be heavily sprayed with synthetic pesticides, herbicides like glyphosate, and other chemicals—especially if they're not also certified organic.

The label can appear on junk foods like sodas, candy, and chips—simply because they don't contain genetically engineered ingredients (like corn or soy).

That doesn't make them clean or nourishing.

Some Non-GMO crops (like corn or canola) are still grown using chemical fertilizers, soil-depleting monocultures, and post-harvest chemical treatments.

✓ Look for “Certified Organic” AND “Non-GMO Project Verified” for the strongest assurance of clean, chemical-free food.



Impossible Burger Ingredients

9. Plant-Based:

A comforting buzzword—but doesn’t automatically mean healthy, clean, or whole-food. Many plant-based products—like meat and dairy alternatives—are ultra-processed, full of industrial seed oils, chemical additives, synthetic vitamins, and lab-created ingredients.

Popular brands like the Impossible Burger and Beyond Meat contain GMOs, natural flavors, textured soy protein, yeast extracts (MSG-like), and methylcellulose (a chemical laxative used as a binder).

“Plant-based” can legally apply to highly refined junk food—from cookies to chips—just because the base ingredient was once a plant.

✓ Real plant-based eating centers on whole vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, and seeds—not factory-made Frankenfoods wrapped in greenwashing.

10. Natural Flavors

Sounds harmless—but this vague, catch-all term can legally contain up to 100 chemical compounds.

These may include: solvents, preservatives, emulsifiers, artificial sweeteners, hidden MSG, animal byproducts (even in vegan-labeled foods)

And here's the kicker: "Natural flavors" are even allowed in certified organic products.

Why?

Because USDA Organic allows certain "non-organic" substances as long as they're on an approved list—and natural flavors make the cut, even though their full ingredients remain proprietary and undisclosed. You have no way of knowing where they come from, how they were processed, or what's really in them.

"Natural" doesn't mean safe, healthy, or transparent.

It means you don't get to know.

 Want to avoid them? Choose products with clear, whole food ingredients—like herbs, spices, and essential oils—and brands that voluntarily disclose their flavoring sources.

You're Already Ahead of the Curve...

By learning to spot these red flags, you've taken a powerful step toward cleaner, more conscious eating. The truth is that food labels are often designed to mislead—not to inform—and it takes a sharp eye to see through the marketing.

If this guide opened your eyes, the next step is the Clean Eating Secrets Masterclass — where I go deep on six of these label claims with the full story the food industry doesn't want you to know.

Same territory, completely different depth. If this guide made you say "I had no idea" — the masterclass will make you say "I can never unsee this." Get instant access → [greenlivingnow.com/masterclass](https://www.greenlivingnow.com/masterclass)

Be well,

Amy

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Amy Hartshorn is a certified organic farmer, nontoxic living educator, and host of the [Green Living Now podcast and YouTube channel](#). She was the founding Executive Director of the Household Toxins Institute (started by the Founder of Seventh Generation), the technical editor of Green Living for Dummies, and a TEDx-invited speaker. For over 34 years she has helped health-conscious women see through the labels, loopholes, and outright lies that make clean eating harder than it needs to be — moving them from confused and second-guessing to clear, confident, and in control. She teaches from her certified organic farm in Waitsfield, Vermont, which means everything she shares comes from someone who has lived the gap between what food labels claim and what actually grows in the ground.