

GREEN LIVING NOW

THE COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO FOOD LABEL CLAIMS

Decode Labels. Make Informed Choices. Live Greener.



YOUR ROADMAP
TO SMARTER,
GREENER
CHOICES

Introduction

Congratulations!

You've taken a significant step on the journey to live a greener healthier lifestyle.

With **The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims**, you'll learn important information about the various claims that food product labels are making, which ones are worth paying attention to, and which are not. This will save you valuable time and money while you're shopping for truly greener healthier products.



All of this educational information is designed to give you valuable, practical, useful tips that you can put into action right away. That said, it's always important to do your own research too.

Whether you're just starting out on your green living journey, or you've been pursuing a healthy lifestyle for a while, you'll learn some valuable insights and practical real-world advice for how to navigate creating a non-toxic, greener lifestyle.

It's kind of overwhelming to think about it, but the fact is that our food supply is pretty messed up, our healthcare system is more about treating sickness than preventing it, and our way of life is pretty toxic. It's a lot to handle, for sure. But I've learned that making positive changes doesn't have to happen all at once. It's more about taking small steps, like choosing products and habits that are better for the environment and our health. I'm all about progress over perfection. That's what works for me.

Why is understanding food label claims so important to the savvy health-conscious consumer? The short answer is so that you don't get fooled into purchasing something that you believe is better for you than it actually is.

The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims

By the time you finish reading this guide, you'll learn:

- Which items on a food product label you should pay attention, which ones to ignore, and which ones are a mixed bag.
- Gain clarity on the 6 mandatory elements on food labels.
- A simple breakdown of Sell-by, Use-by, and Best-by dates to help you understand food freshness and avoid waste.
- A printable shopping list with the top tier labels that are worth paying attention to.
- 22 meaningful, trustworthy certifications that align with sustainable and ethical standards.
- 33 “secondary tier” labels—those that may not fully meet your expectations but still provide useful information.
- Uncover the secrets behind those little stickers on fruits and veggies, including how to tell if they're organic, conventional, or GMO.

And, I'll sprinkle in some health tips along the way.

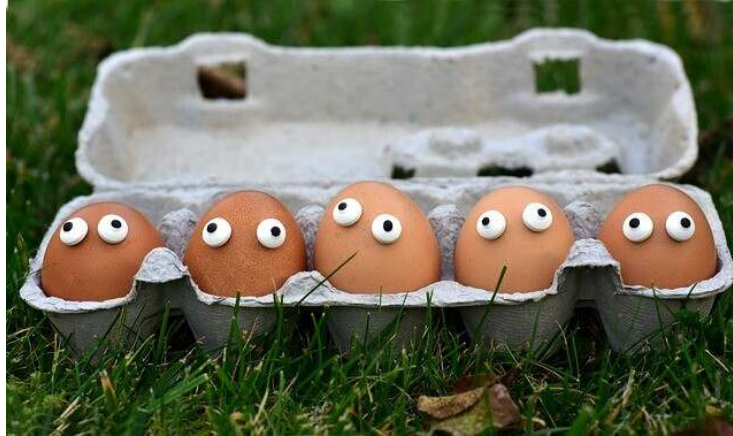
When you know what's on the food labels, it helps you make better decisions that fit your values, health goals, and concerns for the environment.

Plus, it makes it easier to avoid allergens and pick products that are sourced responsibly.

Ultimately, understanding food labels lets you make thoughtful choices about the food you eat. By paying attention to these claims, we can support businesses that are open and honest about what they offer. In the end, understanding food labels gives us the power to choose products that are right for us.

I hope it saves you time and money when you're shopping.

The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims



So, what's the story with all of these label claims?

I used to believe that everything a manufacturer slapped on a label was the absolute truth. And don't even get me started on those product commercials on TV with their wild claims - when I was a kid there were laws against making false claims.

But here's the thing, I've spent over 34 years studying food labels, and I've learned that many of the fancy words on labels are just tactics to get us to buy their product.

It's also clear that most labels have their good and bad points, so as consumers, we still need to do our research to figure out which ones are most reliable.

The information in this eBook is the best of what I've learned thus far. It's also always changing.

For example, sometimes a wonderful independent company becomes successful and then they get purchased by a larger corporate entity.

That means that ingredients as well as label claims can change, so we have to stay vigilant.

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Take "local" for example. It's a great selling point, but what does it really mean?

Turns out, it can mean anything from 50 miles to 250 miles away! That's a big difference, and it doesn't even tell you how fresh it is.

So, if you really want to be sure you're getting the real deal, head on over to a farm stand or farmer's market.

You'll not only be supporting local businesses, but you'll be getting fresher produce too.

Ok, so let's dive into label land...

There are the 6 mandatory federal requirements in labeling packaged food

1. Statement of identity or name of the food.
2. Net quantity of contents or amount of product.
3. Nutrition Facts Label.
4. Ingredient Statement.
5. Allergen Declaration.
6. Name and address of the manufacturer, packer, or distributor.

These are some of the key federal requirements for labeling packaged food in the United States. It's important to note that specific regulations might vary based on the type of food product, and additional requirements may apply to certain types of products.

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When you look at a food product, what do you typically see?

Front, side, and back of package labels.



What's a Front of Package Label (FOP)?



The FOP is what we see first. It likely influences some of our decision making.

It's important to note that the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) does not closely monitor the FOP claims--they're **voluntary**, so it's harder to determine whether or not a product is potentially harmful.

We really have to become our own green living expert.

The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims

Food companies can put the claims they want to promote on the front of their products while keeping other details in the background. Studies have found that "front-of-package" warning labels work better than just listing nutrient facts. And, it's no surprise that research has also shown that people tend to think products with health claims on the front are healthier than those without.

On this coconut oil label, you can see what the product is (unrefined virgin coconut oil), who the company is that produced or distributed it (O Organics), and the contents amount (23 Fluid ounces).



You'll also see the USDA certified organic logo, so you know it's 100% organic, the Non-GMO verified logo (no genetically modified ingredients), the G for gluten free and the Fair Trade Certified (I'll talk about those in a bit.).

There's also some nutrition information: per 1 tablespoon it has 120 calories, 13 grams of saturated fat, no sodium or sugar. It's interesting that they include the saturated fat on the front, as there's been such a demonization of saturated fat.

This coconut oil label has a lot of information on it, which could just confuse us and make it harder to choose the healthiest option. That said, if you're on a low-fat, low salt, low sugar diet though, this could be very helpful.

Some people, like me, want more **meaningful** information about the products that they're buying rather than less. They want to know about both the nutrition and the ingredients. I am most interested in the ingredients, as that can make or break a purchase for me.

The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims



Side and Back of Package Labels

On the side and back of a food package, you can find a lot of extra information. This could include a list of **ingredients**, any **allergens**, details about the **nutrition content**, **serving suggestions**, **how to prepare and store the food**, and **contact details** for the manufacturer. You might also see symbols or terms that suggest the **quality or special attributes** of the product, like "organic" or "certified."

Ingredients

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) "oversees" the ingredients listed on food labels. Typically, the ingredients are listed based on their weight in the product, with the heaviest listed first.

The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims



For example, in these organic bread crumbs, organic wheat makes up the majority of the product in weight.

(P.S. I don't love that there's silicon dioxide—an anti-caking agent that is supposedly safe— is in there, though it's the last ingredient, so it is the least by weight.)

Allergy Information

"Under the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004, eight major food allergens—milk, fish, tree nuts, peanuts, shellfish, wheat, eggs, and soybeans—are required to be listed in a "contains" statement near the ingredients list if present in a food."

— Harvard School of Public Health- The Nutrition Source

You've probably also noticed the "cross-contamination" warning.
E.g. "may contain wheat" or "produced in a facility that also uses peanuts."



As of January 1, 2023, sesame was required to be listed as an allergen, making it #9.

According to the Harvard School of Public Health, the other potential allergens include gluten (more about gluten later in this ebook) and color additives, such as FD&C Yellow No. 5.

The FDA mandates that a product containing FD&C Yellow No. 5 must identify it on the food label, and the term "gluten-free" can only be listed if it tests under 20 ppm of gluten.

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A few words about **food dyes**—bottom line—**avoid them**.

Toxicology of food dyes

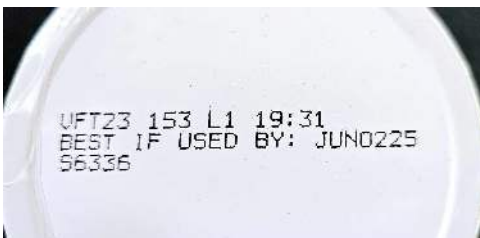
(Read more here: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23026007/>)

"Conclusions: This review finds that **all of the nine currently US-approved dyes raise health concerns of varying degrees. Red 3 causes cancer in animals, and there is evidence that several other dyes also are carcinogenic.** Three dyes (Red 40, Yellow 5, and Yellow 6) have been found to be **contaminated with benzidine or other carcinogens.** At least four dyes (Blue 1, Red 40, Yellow 5, and Yellow 6) **cause hypersensitivity reactions.** Numerous microbiological and rodent studies of Yellow 5 were **positive for genotoxicity...**

Sell-by, Use-by, and Best-by dates

With the exception of baby formula, there are no federal requirements for food dating.

There are 2 types of food dating, "open" and "closed."



So, an **open food dating label** is usually the date you see on a food product that tells you when it's **best to eat it by**. After that date, the quality might not be as good, but it's usually still safe to eat.

Maybe you've been as confused about this one as I have. I thought that when I saw a date on a food product that it indicated when the product was no longer safe to eat. Apparently, not.

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Health Tip: In general, canned foods like tuna, soups, and vegetables can be stored for 2 to 5 years. High-acid foods like juices, tomatoes, and pickles can be stored for 1 to 18 months. Look out for dents and bulges in cans, as they may indicate it's time to throw them away.

There are **no uniform or universally accepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating** in the United States. As a result, there are a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.

Examples of commonly used phrases:

A **"Best if Used By/Before"** date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. **It is not a purchase or safety date.**

A **"Sell-By"** date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. **It is not a safety date.**

A **"Use-By"** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product **while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula as described below.**

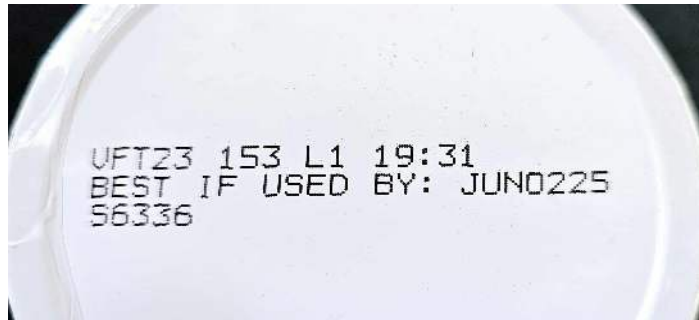
A **"Freeze-By"** date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. **It is not a purchase or safety date.**

— USDA, Food Inspection and Safety Service

What's "Closed Dating" mean?

"Closed Dating" consists of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify the date and time of production. They typically appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food." (This organic coconut oil actually has both the closed dating AND the "best if used by" date.)

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An important take-away on these labels is that **they are not an indication of food safety**. They only tell us when the product is at its best, which doesn't feel particularly helpful to me.



Meaningful and Trusted Food Labels

These are the labels that are regulated and/or audited by a certifying agency or independent organization. They tend to have the highest most comprehensive standards and can be verified. I find them to be the most meaningful and trustworthy. First, you'll see the list of all of them, and then I'll go into more details about each one.

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Top Tier Labels- The ones in green are the cream of the crop

1. American Grassfed Association
2. American Welfare Approved
3. Certified Grassfed by A Greener World (AGW) for Beef
4. Certified Organic Grassfed Dairy by Organic Plus Trust
5. Certified Regenerative by A Greener World (AGW)
6. Demeter Certified Biodynamic
7. Fair for Life
8. Fair Trade Certified
9. Farmed Responsibly ASC
10. Gluten-Free Certification Organization (GFCO)
11. Halal
12. Marine Stewardship Council- Seafood
13. Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) - (NOFA Certified Organic Grassfed)
14. Non-GMO Project Verified (beef, pork, chicken, dairy, eggs & produce)
15. OU Kosher
16. PLO Certified Grassfed
17. QAI Certified Organic
18. Real Organic Project
19. Regenerative Organic Certified Gold
20. Star-K
21. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Certified Organic (beef, pork chicken, dairy, eggs & produce)
22. UTZ Certified

Take a picture of the following page with your phone or print it out and take it shopping with you so that you always know which ones are the most trusted labels.

Amy's Trusted Label Cheat Sheet

- American Grassfed Association
- American Welfare Approved
- Certified Grassfed by A Greener World (AGW) for beef
- Certified Organic Grassfed for Dairy by Organic Plus Trust
- Certified Regenerative by AGW
- Demeter Certified Biodynamic
- Fair for Life
- Fair Trade Certified
- Farmed Responsibly ASC
- Gluten Free Certification Organization
- Halal
- Marine Stewardship Council-Seafood
- Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) & NOFA Certified Organic Grassfed
- Non-GMO Project Verified (beef, pork, chicken, dairy, eggs, and produce)
- OU Kosher
- PLO Certified Grassfed
- QAI Certified Organic
- Real Organic Project
- Regenerative Organic Certified Gold
- Star-K
- USDA Certified Organic for beef, pork, chicken, eggs, dairy and produce
- UTZ Certified

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Top Tier Labels Defined

1. American Grassfed

The American Grassfed seal, overseen by the American Grassfed Association, ensures that cattle are only fed grass and are raised on managed pastures to obtain all their nutrition from grass. Farms are inspected every 15 months at different times of the year, and the standards prohibit antibiotics, growth-promoting drugs, and genetically modified crops. Synthetic pesticides are a last resort, and the certification includes some animal welfare provisions, such as providing shade and shelter.

2. Animal Welfare Approved by AGW

The only label that ensures animals are raised outdoors on pasture or range for their entire lives on an independent farm using truly sustainable, high-welfare farming practices. It is the only U.S. label that mandates audited, high-welfare production, transport, and slaughter practices. AGW's independent trained auditors visit every farm in the program at least once a year to verify they're meeting the standards.

3. Certified Grassfed by A Greener World (AGW)

This standard is a leading animal welfare label that mandates animals to consume a pasture-based, ruminant diet consisting only of grass, promoting better animal health and nutrient quality in the final product. The label also ensures that animals are not confined to feedlots and are not treated with daily medications. Requires verification/Inspection.

4. Certified Organic Grassfed Dairy by Organic Plus Trust

OPT's Certified Grass-Fed Organic Livestock Program™ is the first national standard for organic, grass-fed livestock for meat and dairy. It provides third-party certification for the entire supply chain, ensuring that all certified products are handled according to the standards from birth to sale. All grass, no grain. Animal health checks are mandatory. Organic practices are the basis. Farms are certified annually for grass-fed production by an independent third-party. Animals must have access to pasture for a minimum of 150 days per year. The certification covers the entire process from field to table.

5. Certified Regenerative by A Greener World (AGW) for Beef



This label certifies if products originate from a farm employing regenerative practices. It surpasses USDA Organic Standards by establishing detailed requirements for environmental, social, and animal welfare, including thorough monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions. Requires Verification/Inspection.

6. Demeter Certified Biodynamic



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Demeter Certified Biodynamic farming is all about a holistic and sustainable approach. It means using organic methods, having diverse crops and animals, and rotating crops, all while using natural compost and fertilizers. It also involves following cosmic influences and lunar and astrological rhythms for planting and harvesting. The aim is to create a balanced and regenerative farming environment, emphasizing sustainability and environmental responsibility.

7. Fair for Life

This label shows consideration for social justice and environmental sustainability, but not all of the product needs to be certified. Fair trade guarantees producers a fair purchase price and protection in crises, with minimum price guarantees based on production costs. It also promotes safe working conditions, supports producer autonomy, and encourages environmentally friendly agricultural practices, including organic farming. Verification and inspection are required.



8. Fair Trade Certified

Fair Trade guarantees fair prices for crops like coffee, tea, cacao, fruit, sugar, rice, and spices. It ensures safe working conditions, sustainable farming, and community development projects. Fair Trade is certified in the U.S. through Fair Trade USA, an independent third-party certifier, which reported a 75 percent growth in sales of Fair Trade Certified products in 2011.

9. Farmed Responsibly ASC



An independent organization certifies the environmental and social wellbeing of farmed seafood, with robust worker welfare and traceability standards. Each animal must be traceable from the ocean to the plate and undergo strong third-party verification. This includes verification/inspection. Healthy fish cannot be given antibiotics without a veterinarian certifying the disease, and the use of critically important antibiotics is prohibited. They also do not allow transgenic fish, but they do permit GMO feed.

10. Gluten-Free Certification Organization (GFCO)

Products with this seal are certified to be gluten-free, containing less than 10 parts per million of gluten. The certification program is offered by Quality Assurance International and the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness, ensuring that the products meet stringent standards through science-based verification and rigorous testing. This includes annual inspections, ingredient checks, random testing, and surprise audits.

11. Marine Stewardship Council Certified Sustainable Seafood

The MSC is considered a top sustainable label for wild-caught fish, focused on preventing overfishing and habitat protection. Third-party auditors certify, but some worry about the scientific rigor and possible influence from fishing associations paying for certification. Organizations like the World Wildlife Fund push for more oversight and transparency in the MSC certification process. Requires Verification/Inspection.



12. NOFA Certified Organic Grassfed

In addition to being an organic and eco-friendly label, this certification requires animals to consume a pasture-based, ruminant diet consisting only of grass, leading to better animal health and nutrient quality in the final product. The label also ensures that animals are not confined to feedlots and are not given daily medications. Requires Verification/Inspection.

13. Non-GMO Project Verified-Seafood

If you're not eating strictly organic, chances are you're consuming GMO crops. For instance, more than 90% of U.S.-grown corn is GMO and is used in many processed foods.

This label makes sure that the food given to farmed fish doesn't contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and lowers the chances of GMO-related contamination during production. The products and their ingredients are tested for GMO DNA or checked to make sure they do not include genetically engineered items. However, the Non-GMO Project can't guarantee that products are completely free of GMO residue because GMOs are commonly used in the food industry. The feed samples must have less than 5% GMO ingredients. Non-GMO doesn't mean the product is organic, and it doesn't address pesticides or other chemicals in the feed. Verification and inspection are necessary.

Health Tip: Over 50% of sugar is made from GMO sugar beets.

More than 95% of the animals raised for meat and dairy eat GMO's.

But, to slap a "Non-GMO" label on fresh produce, like blueberries, is meaningless since blueberries are not currently grown with GMO seeds.

The following fresh produce could be GMO: sweet corn, apples, papaya, sugar beets (made into sugar), pink pineapples, summer squash,

14. OU Kosher

The OU Kosher label signifies that a product or establishment has met the strict dietary requirements of kosher laws. It refers to kosher certification provided by the Orthodox Union, which is one of the largest and most widely recognized kosher certification agencies in the world. It is a widely recognized symbol of kosher certification overseen by a team of trained rabbis and is trusted by consumers and businesses for its reliability.

15. PLO Certified Organic Grassfed

This certification not only meets organic and strong environmental standards, but it also requires that animals eat a diet of pasture-based, grass-only, which makes them healthier and improves the quality of the final product. The label also makes sure animals are not kept in feedlots and don't receive daily medications. It needs to be verified and inspected.

16. QAI Certified Organic

"QAI Certified Organic" label is a reliable and trusted certification. QAI, which stands for Quality Assurance International, is an accredited certifying agency that conducts inspections and audits to ensure that products carrying the label meet strict organic standards. Therefore, products with the QAI Certified Organic label have undergone thorough scrutiny and can be trusted as meeting organic certification requirements.

17. Real Organic Project

This label serves as an extension to the USDA Organic label. Certified farms uphold higher standards for animal welfare, soil health, and worker welfare than the USDA organic certification alone. Requires Verification/Inspection.



18. Regenerative Organic Certified Gold: Beef

This label goes beyond USDA Organic requirements to include extra rules for environmental, animal, and worker welfare. Farms with the ROC Gold certification must manage all their land and make money only from compliant products. ROC Gold also has more rules for environmental and worker welfare compared to Bronze and Silver certifications. It needs to be verified and inspected.

19. Star-K Kosher Certification

The Star-K certification agency is widely recognized for certifying kosher products and offers supervision and certification for various industries. The Star-K is a well-known and respected certification agency that provides kosher certification for thousands of products and food establishments around the world. They have a team of trained rabbis who ensure that the products and facilities meet strict kosher dietary laws. The Star-K certification is trusted as a reliable symbol of kosher compliance by consumers and businesses.

20. USDA Certified Organic (with my personal caution)

The USDA is responsible for accrediting organic certifiers and does not do any organic certification itself.

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In Vermont, where I live, the organic certifier is the Vermont Organic Farmers, LLC. It is a USDA-Accredited Certifying Agent owned by NOFA-VT. Our farm, Hartshorn Farm, in Waitsfield, VT, is a VOF certified organic farm. Other states have their own certifying agents too.

USDA certified organic means that the food or product has been made without



synthetic chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers. It also means that the farmers have used environmentally friendly practices to take care of the soil and the animals. Organic products don't allow or include the same synthetic processing aids and artificial ingredients that you might see in conventional foods.

For meat animals, this label means that they are fed certified organic feed, no GMO's, no antibiotics (sick animals treated cannot be certified) however vaccines are allowed. No sewage sludge as fertilizer, and no ionizing radiation can be used. Must have year-round access to the outdoors with fresh air and direct sunlight. Cows, sheep and goats must have access to pasture.

There are 4 levels of organic products:

1. First, and I think best, is "**100% certified organic.**"
2. Then there's "**organic,**" which means 95% organic ingredients.
3. Next, it's "**Made with Organic,**" at least 70% of the ingredients have to be organic.
4. Less than 70% organic ingredients, the **label can simply list the organic ingredients.**

The caution part—when the USDA got into the certifying process, they wanted to include gmo seeds, sewage sludge as fertilizer, and ionizing radiation (typically used on some meats and spices.) Thankfully, a huge public outcry stopped them from making organic certification hardly any better than conventional growing.



These are the organic certifiers that I think have proven themselves to be trustworthy: Oregon Tilth, Vermont Organic Farmers via Northeast Organic Farming Association, (NOFA), California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), Quality Assurance International, Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association (MOFGA).

21. UTZ Certified

UTZ Certified is a program and label that promotes sustainable farming for coffee, cocoa, and tea. It supports farmers in implementing responsible agricultural practices, improving working conditions, and caring for nature. Products with the UTZ label come from farms that meet these sustainability standards.

Secondary Tier. Less Regulated, Not Quite as Trusted Food Labels

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1. American Humane Certified
2. Best Aquaculture Practices Certified- Seafood
3. Beyond Celiac Gluten-Free
4. Bird Friendly Coffee
5. Certified Humane
6. Certified Naturally Grown (beef, pork chicken, dairy, eggs & produce)
7. Dolphin Safe
8. Eco Apple by IPM Institute
9. Eco Stone Fruit by IPM Institute
10. Fair Food Program
11. Fair Trade Certified- Produce
12. Fair Trade Certified-Seafood
13. Farmed Responsibly ASC Certified for Seafood
14. Food Alliance Certified
15. Food Justice Certified: Beef
16. Friend of the Sea
17. Global Animal Partnership 1-5+
18. Grass-fed
19. Halal
20. Heritage Breeds
21. Kosher
22. Low Sodium/Very Low Sodium
23. No Antibiotics
24. Oceanwise Certified
25. Pasture Raised
26. Protected Harvest
27. Rainforest Alliance Certified
28. Regenerative Organic Certified, Bronze & Silver
29. Salmon Safe
30. USDA Process Verified for Meat
31. Vegetarian Feed
32. 100% Whole Grain/Made with Whole Grains
33. Whole Foods Market Responsibly Farmed Seafood

1. American Humane Certified

Previously called the Free Farmed program, this label offers third-party, independent verification that certified producers follow the science-based animal welfare standards of the American Humane Association in their care and handling of farm animals. These standards mandate that animals are raised in a manner that reduces stress and provides adequate shelter, comfortable resting areas, sufficient space, proper facilities, and the ability to engage in typical behavior.

2. Best Aquaculture Practices Certified-Seafood



BAP is a certification program from a third-party that focuses on farmed fish. While this certification includes certain key factors such as stocking densities and tracking, it does not tackle significant fish feed issues, does not prohibit the use of drugs, and does not address serious labor practices. Verification and inspection are necessary.

3. Beyond Celiac Gluten-Free

The Beyond Celiac Gluten-Free certification program has strict requirements for products. This includes testing for gluten levels of less than 5 parts per million, regular checks by an accredited lab, adherence to food safety regulations, and robust gluten management practices. Additional criteria involve clear labeling, commitment to ongoing audits, and covering various food categories. All these measures aim to instill confidence in consumers with celiac disease or gluten sensitivities.



4. Bird Friendly Coffee

This label, certified by scientists at the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, is only awarded to organic coffee that meets strict shade and forest type requirements. Referred to as "Bird Friendly," it ensures the coffee plantation provides good bird habitats, such as maintaining tree canopies and

diverse plant species.

5. Certified Humane

The credibility of the certified humane label is in question due to varying certification levels and concerns about the strictness and enforcement of standards, as well as reports of violations at labeled facilities. While farms and slaughterhouses have rules against animal abuse and provide comfortable living conditions, there are still areas of concern regarding the label's reliability.

6. Certified Naturally Grown (beef, pork chicken, dairy, eggs & produce)

This label, created by farmers who wanted to avoid USDA organic certification, largely adheres to USDA organic standards. However, verification is carried out by CNG farmers, not independent certifiers. Requires Verification/Inspection.

7. Dolphin Safe



This specific certification deals with dolphin safety, focusing on the use or non-use of a net known as a "purse seine" that can accidentally capture and harm dolphins. Verification and inspection are required to meet this standard.

8. Eco Apple by IPM Institute

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The "Eco-Apple" label by IPM does have a verification and inspection process in place. In order to obtain and maintain the certification, apple growers must adhere to specific environmentally friendly and sustainable practices. This typically involves regular inspections by independent organizations or certification bodies to ensure that the criteria for the label are being met.

These inspections often cover various aspects of the growing process, such as pesticide use, environmental impact, and labor conditions.



9. Eco Stone Fruit by IPM Institute

The "Eco Stone Fruit" label by IPM certifies that growers of stone fruits like peaches, plums, nectarines, and cherries follow sustainable and environmentally friendly practices, including reducing pesticide use, protecting the environment, and ensuring worker safety.



10. Fair Food Program

The Fair Food Program label assures consumers that the food has been produced with fair worker treatment. It is associated with the Fair Food Program in the U.S., focusing on just labor practices, particularly in the tomato industry. It is also produced without industrial pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, GMOs, or antibiotics on crops. Biodiversity is required, and soil health is monitored and improved over time.

11. Fair Trade Certified-Produce

The Fair-Trade Certified label means the product meets certain social, environmental, and economic standards. It guarantees fair wages, safe working conditions, and sustainable practices for producers. This label also ensures the product was produced without industrial pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, GMOs, and antibiotics on crops. It supports biodiversity and monitors soil health for improvement over time. Some restrictions exist on the most toxic pesticides, and while the label requires some biodiversity, it is not comprehensive.

12. Fair Trade Certified-Seafood

The Fair-Trade Certified label for seafood is only for wild-caught fish, not farmed. It ensures optimal stocking densities, prohibits purse seine nets, restricts incidental bycatch and minimizes disruption to the ecosystem with a tracking system in place for chain of custody and origin.

13. Farmed Responsibly ASC Certified for Seafood

ASC is a separate group that checks on how well seafood farms take care of the environment and workers. They follow guidelines from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the ISEAL Appliance Code of Good Practice. They also have strict rules for worker welfare and tracing where the seafood comes from. Verification and inspection are needed.



14. Food Alliance Certified- Produce

The Food Alliance label includes environmental and social sustainability factors. It scores different options for each aspect based on various attributes. While some labels may have stricter requirements, the Food Alliance covers a wide range of areas with less strict requirements in each one, as compared to my top picks.

15. Food Justice Certified: Beef

This label is a newer but thorough certification for promoting social justice in farming, particularly in the US. It mandates that farms must be Certified Organic as a prerequisite. It would be a top choice if it were more widely accessible. Verification and inspection are required.

16. Friend of the Sea

This international third-party verified certification is for both farmed and wild seafood. It promotes sustainable and responsible sourcing, provides traceability, and assures consumers about the environmental impact of the seafood they are purchasing. It helps reduce negative effects on marine life and ecosystems. Their standards are not well-documented, and it is hard to determine what they are or if they can be trusted.

Requires Verification/Inspection



17. Global Animal Partnership (GAP) 1-5+

These GAP labels are a mixed bag. Animals raised under Steps 4, 5, and 5+ are outdoors on pasture, Step 3 has some outdoor access, and Steps 1 and 2 allow feedlots without outdoor access. All steps prohibit cages, crates, and crowding. They allow GMO feed but do not give antibiotics to healthy animals (sick animals can be treated but not certified). Standards are in place to minimize painful physical alterations, but there are no audits to ensure humane slaughter.

18. Grassfed



Producers must provide documentation to the USDA to make this claim, which often involves healthier animal practices. Animals have more space, less crowded living conditions, and are often locally raised and butchered. Cons: There is no national rule, and the USDA removed its requirement for continuous pasture access. There are no routine

checks to ensure the claim is being used correctly.

19. Halal

When it comes to food and drink, it's easier to identify what is not halal than to designate what is. All foods are considered halal unless they are strictly forbidden, or haram. According to Islamic law, the following food and drink are not permitted: pork and its by-products, animals that were dead before slaughtering, alcoholic drinks and intoxicants, animals not slaughtered using the halal method, carnivorous animals and birds of prey, blood and blood by-products, and animals contaminated with any of the above.

20. Heritage Breeds



The U.S.D.A requires proof from producers to make a preservation claim, however, there is no regular on-farm inspection. Some meat producers use "heritage" and "heirloom" terms without strict oversight. The Livestock Conservancy offers definitions and lists of heritage poultry and livestock, but does not certify producers, leading to limited regulation of these terms.

21. Kosher

"Kosher" typically denotes food products that adhere to Jewish dietary laws, including the avoidance of certain ingredients and the proper preparation of food. Kosher dietary laws prohibit the consumption of certain animal products, including pork and shellfish. Additionally, the mixing of dairy and meat products is also prohibited in kosher food preparation. Certain types of fish and poultry must also be prepared according to specific guidelines to be considered kosher.

22. Low Sodium/Very Low Sodium

The low sodium/very low sodium food label is generally trusted as it is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and must meet specific criteria to carry such a label. Low-sodium foods have 140 mg or less per serving, and very low-sodium foods have 35 mg or less per serving.

23. No Antibiotics

Producers must provide the USDA with documentation to prove animals have not received antibiotics, meeting the USDA's "no antibiotics" definition for red meat and poultry. Unfortunately, the USDA did not officially make it a rule that animals must never receive antibiotics from birth to harvest, and there are no regular on-farm checks to verify the correctness of this claim.

24. Oceanwise Certified



To promote sustainable seafood consumption, Ocean Wise carefully certifies seafood based on the following criteria: abundance and resilience of the species to fishing pressures, a comprehensive management plan supported by up-to-date research, minimal damage to marine or aquatic habitats and other species during harvesting, and limited bycatch of non-target and endangered fish species. The limitations of the Ocean Wise food label include limited availability, potential cost barriers, subjectivity in its criteria, lack of global standards, and varying consumer awareness.

25. Pasture Raised' and 'Free Range'

When you see '**Pasture Raised**' or "**Free Range**" **alone** on your egg carton, **it doesn't indicate anything specific**. However, if they're combined with the "**American Humane Certified**" or "**Certified Humane**" seal, they have more meaning. **Pasture-raised eggs** have hens that continuously access the outdoors to roam and forage, while **free-range eggs** mean the hens have **some** outdoor access, with conditions varying.

26. Protected Harvest

Protected Harvest, a nonprofit organization, certifies farmers using environmentally friendly growing techniques called Biointensive Integrated Pest Management, a safer alternative to pesticides. The method uses natural techniques and beneficial organisms to minimize the need for chemical pesticides and aims to maintain a balanced ecosystem in agriculture while reducing harm to the environment and human health. Almost 30,000 acres of farmland are certified by Protected Harvest, including wine grapes, potatoes, mushrooms, stone fruits, and citrus, with plans to expand certification to dairy, almonds, tomatoes, and various fresh produce.

27. Rainforest Alliance Certified

The Rainforest Alliance is a global non-profit that works to protect forests, support farmers and communities, and address climate change. Their certification ensures products are produced sustainably and ethically, promoting environmental conservation and worker well-being. Look for their red-eyed tree frog logo on items like chocolate, coffee, and tea. The Rainforest Alliance label's limitations include its narrow focus, criticism regarding its effectiveness, high costs for producers, complexity of the certification process, and concerns about transparency and enforcement of its standards.

28. Regenerative Organic Certified, Bronze & Silver

The ROC Bronze certification is an extension of the USDA Organic label with additional requirements for environmental, animal, and worker welfare. The certification prohibits the use of antibiotics except for sick animals and also prohibits the use of hormones or other drugs for healthy animals.

Additionally, it requires pasture management or rotational grazing, prohibits industrial pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, and sewage sludge, and requires biodiversity in the pasture, as well as soil health monitoring and measurement for improvement over time. The process also includes emissions modeling and accounting for environmental impact.

The **Bronze level** focuses on basic regenerative organic practices, while the **Silver level** emphasizes more advanced and comprehensive regenerative organic practices, showing a higher level of achievement in sustainable farming.

29. Salmon Safe



Farms that carry the Salmon Safe label are inspected by independent experts who certify the use of agricultural practices that protect healthy streams and wetlands. These practices, which include chemical management, water use, responsible animal farming, and erosion control contribute to the restoration of stream ecosystem health in the native salmon fisheries

of the Pacific Northwest. This independent eco-label is gaining recognition nationwide and is found on various products such as wine, dairy, and produce demonstrating the commitment of the producers to environmentally friendly practices that protect and restore the health of streams and wetlands, especially in the Pacific Northwest. The limitations of the Salmon Safe label include limited product availability, regional focus, narrow scope, verification challenges for producers, and limited consumer awareness.

30. USDA Processed Verified for Meat

The USDA has checked paperwork and visited farms to confirm that producers are following their own rules. **There are no federal standards for different claims, so producers can set their own rules.** They must have on-farm inspections every year.

31. Vegetarian Feed

Producers need to provide documentation to the U.S. Department of Agriculture to prove that animals were fed only vegetarian feed, but there is **no clear legal definition for this claim**. For example, chickens, turkeys, and other omnivores can still naturally forage for insects and grubs. However, there are **no regular on-farm inspections** to ensure the accurate use of this claim.



32. 100% Whole Grain vs Made with Whole Grains

100% Whole Grain: If a product has this label, it should only contain whole grains, and whole-wheat flour (or another whole grain) should be listed as the first ingredient.

Made With Whole Grains: This label indicates that a product may contain a small amount of whole grain, with the remainder of the grains being refined.

33. Whole Foods Market Responsibly Farmed Seafood

This label applies to seafood sold at Whole Foods Market. Developed with Monterey Bay Aquarium, it bans antibiotics and GMO feed ingredients for different seafood. Third-party certifiers verify compliance, but the label overlooks issues like industrial farming and worker welfare.

A few words about Vegan labels:

Certified Vegan labeled products are totally free from any animal byproducts such as dairy, eggs, and honey. They also must meet rules like not being tested on animals. Limitations of the certified vegan label include its narrow focus on animal-derived ingredients, variations in standards, potential for cross-contamination, limited scope, and varying consumer awareness. You'll see the Certified Vegan Logo on products globally and they're known as vegan friendly.

Vegan Approved Stamp:

Pros of this stamp include providing assurance and enabling ethical choices. Cons may include the risk of cross-contamination, variations in standards, and potential lack of consumer awareness.

Vegan Friendly Stamp:

Pros of the Vegan-Friendly stamp include consumer guidance, meeting market demand, and supporting a vegan lifestyle. Cons may include lack of regulation, complex supply chains, and the risk of cross-contamination.

When you spot the **vegan approved stamp**, you know it ticks both the **Certified Vegan** and **Vegan-Friendly** requirements.

But, if you see the **certified vegan label**, it goes even further as it's based on the most comprehensive criteria, being totally free of any animal-derived ingredients. This means not only the omission of meat, dairy, and eggs, but also it means no other animal-derived materials like honey, gelatin, and specific food colorings and additives are used.

Some of the reputable certifiers and trusted **vegan labels** include:

1. **Vegan Action (Certified Vegan)**: This organization provides the Certified Vegan logo for products that do not contain animal ingredients or by-products and have not been tested on animals. It is a **widely recognized and trusted vegan certification**.
2. **The Vegan Society (Vegan Trademark)**: The Vegan Society's Vegan Trademark is an internationally recognized symbol for products that are free from animal ingredients and animal testing. It is a **respected certification** for vegan products.
3. **Certified Vegan by BeVeg**: BeVeg is a globally recognized vegan certification firm that offers the Certified Vegan logo for products that meet their **stringent vegan standards**.



Not Meaningful, Not Trusted Labels

I'm not going to go into detail about these as it would make this eBook too long (except for the ones in bold.)

Suffice it to say, the terms listed below lack specific standards, verification processes, or independent oversight, leading to a wide variation in farm conditions across different producers.

Not Trusted Labels

- American Humane Certified
- American Welfare Review
- Cage Free
- **Eco-Friendly**
- Farm Fresh
- Farmed Fish
- **Free Range Eggs**
- **Gluten Free (vegetables)**
- Grain Finished
- Humanely Raised
- Hydroponically Grown/Hydroponic
- Lean/Extra Lean
- **Natural/All Natural**
- No Antibiotics
- No Hormones Added
- No Nitrates/Nitrites
- No Preservatives/Free from Artificial Ingredients
- Not Treated with rBGH/rst
- Omega 3 fortified, eggs and milk
- **Organic Seafood**
- Pesticide Free
- **Pasture Raised**
- Pole & Line Caught
- Regenerative
- Responsibly Caught
- Sustainably Caught

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- Sustainably Harvested
- Sustainable Seafood
- USDA Process Verified
- United Egg Producers Certified
- Vegetarian Feed
- Washed/Triple-Washed/Ready to Eat
- **Wild Caught/Wild Fish**

Cage Free:



"Cage-free" is seen as an **unreliable** claim because it doesn't guarantee improved living conditions or animal welfare.

Eco-Friendly:

This term is broad and not clearly defined, so it may be used in a misleading manner without specific criteria or certifications. Consumers should be cautious and informed when interpreting food labels, especially those that are not subject to regulated standards or certifications. It's important to look for specific, trustworthy certifications and labels, such as USDA Organic, Non-GMO Project Verified, Fair Trade Certified, and others that have recognized standards and oversight.

Farm Fresh:

This label can be vague, subjective, and may not accurately reflect the origin, sourcing or production methods of the food product.

Free Range Eggs



The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims

This label on egg cartons suggests that the hens have the opportunity to move about freely outdoors. However, **when used alone, the label lacks any specific meaning.** To ensure that the hens have sufficient outdoor space to roam, look for the label in combination with the "American Humane Certified" seal.

Gluten Free

Fresh vegetables and fruits are naturally gluten-free, making the claim redundant. While important for those with celiac disease or gluten sensitivity, the gluten-free label does not necessarily indicate healthier products, as they can still contain high levels of sugars, unhealthy fats, and additives to make up for the absence of gluten,



impacting their texture and taste.

On a side note...Isn't it odd that so many people are gluten intolerant or allergic to gluten? There is some information that indicates that glyphosate, the active ingredient in the very popular (sigh...) herbicide, Roundup, is causing celiac disease (the immune

reaction to eating gluten.)

But that's for another ebook...

Natural:

The term "natural" is often used on food products, but it does not have a standardized or regulated definition. As a result, it can be misleading and not necessarily indicative of environmentally friendly or sustainable practices. That said, consumers tend to believe the claim has a meaning similar to organic.

A Consumers Reports survey in 2015 showed that the majority of consumers—73 percent—seek out foods labeled as 'natural' when food shopping. Shoppers assumed that the "natural" designation means something like no GMO's and no pesticides. Sadly, they're wrong.

Organic Seafood

The current federal regulations do not permit domestic seafood to be certified as organic; however, legally imported fish can be labeled as organic in the United States. Organic standards from other countries may not match the USDA Organic requirements and can vary depending on the country of origin.

Wild Caught-Argh!

Until I started checking my information for this eBook, I thought that this label meant something. Sadly, it's does not because the FDA lacks specific rules to define certain food claims, leading to varied practices. Fraud, mislabeling, and fish substitution are common in the seafood industry, making it hard for consumers to know if a product labeled as wild-caught truly is. Regular inspections to verify these claims are lacking. Independent verification is crucial to confirm the accuracy of wild-caught labeling.

Food Stickers on Fresh Fruits and Veggies

You've likely seen and probably struggled to remove the stickers on produce like bananas and avocado. But, what do they mean?

Conventionally Grown Produce has a four-digit code beginning with a 3 or 4. That means the produce most likely contains pesticides and is sometimes genetically modified.

Certified Organic. produce has a **Five Digit Code** beginning with "9".

The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims

I appreciate your taking the time to dive into this eBook about food labels with me. I hope you've found it helpful in understanding which labels are meaningful, which are not, and which ones are a bit of a mixed bag.

Armed with this knowledge, you're now better prepared to make informed choices when it comes to the food you buy. Let's keep pushing for clearer standards and more sustainable practices in the food industry. Together, we can make a real impact.

Here's to a greener, healthier future!

Amy

You now have the knowledge.

Here's how to put it into action.

If you're ready to walk through your kitchen with fresh eyes -- evaluating not just your food but your cookware, storage, and everything food touches -- [Your Nontoxic Kitchen, Reimagined](#) is your next step.

Not sure where to start?

Take the [free Kitchen Toxin Assessment](#) to find out exactly where your kitchen stands right now.

Ready to go deeper?

The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims

Your Nontoxic Kitchen, Reimagined takes you beyond the swap lists.

Most experts hand you a checklist: throw out this, buy that.

You'll finish this course with something more valuable: the questions to ask about anything in your kitchen, so you stop guessing and start knowing.

Five short videos, plus companion text that walks you through exactly what to look for and why it matters.

By the end, you'll know what actually belongs in a healthy kitchen, and you'll have a framework you can use for every other room in your home. You'll find that [here](#).

Be well!

Amy



Amy Hartshorn

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The Comprehensive Guide to Food Label Claims



Who is Amy Hartshorn?

Trusted Guidance Rooted in 34+ Years of Experience

For over 34 years, I've empowered people to create toxin-free, sustainable homes, adopt clean diets, and embrace natural health practices that genuinely support well-being and have kept my husband, Dave, and me off of pharmaceuticals and away from doctors.

Every recommendation I share is rooted in personal research and hands-on experience—from healthy food and green product suggestions and practices to holistic health tools.

Through my Green Living Essentials [Courses](#), Ebooks, and masterclasses, [Green Living Now Podcast](#), and [immersive farm tours](#), I'm here to offer actionable steps, authentic insights, and a supportive community for your journey to healthier, eco-conscious living.



My Journey

Growing up on the upper east side of New York City, my path to green living began early, working at a health food store at 16. The turning point came during my pregnancy when I discovered a book about toxins in everyday products—revealing how much our environment impacts health.

This realization set me on a 34+ year mission to empower others to live cleaner, healthier lives. Through hands-on experience, expert-led courses, and the upcoming Green Living Now podcast, I'm here to help you make sustainable changes that last.

Amy Hartshorn

www.greenlivingnow.com

Experience & Impact

With over three decades dedicated to green living, my journey includes serving as the **technical editor for the Green Living for Dummies book**, founding the **Household Toxins Institute with Seventh Generation**, and **consulting with clients like a Phish band member**.

My work has been **featured on HGTV**, and I even had an **almost-Oprah moment** when one of her producers reached out. I regularly share useable information via podcast and written interviews, as well as videos and posts on social media. These experiences allow me to bring practical, proven solutions for a healthier, toxin-free lifestyle.



Personal Insights

My connection to nature began with summers on Martha's Vineyard, Long Island and the New Jersey shore, and skiing in Vermont, which sparked a lifelong love of the environment.

For the past 17 years, I've lived on an organic farm in Vermont with my husband, Dave, where we enjoy cooking from scratch, family time, and our one dog, Leila.

I'm passionate about reading, learning, traveling and inspiring others to make a difference.

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