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Beyond the Ads: What to Look for on Nutrition Labels

Have you ever struggled with analysis paralysis at the grocery store? As you walk through the aisles, the variety of options can inundate your senses. You can choose from all kinds of products, including name-brand, generic, organic, natural, and others. When you look at all your choices, you might feel overwhelmed.

At first glance, most grocery items might appear the same, making it even harder to know what you should select. This eBook will help you sort through the noise to make healthy decisions for you and your family.

Organic vs. Natural: What's the Difference?

Terms related to healthy food are often used interchangeably, but there are actually important distinctions that determine whether a food qualifies as natural or organic.¹ Consider these differences:

Natural products are free of artificial or synthetic ingredients and additives. However, there are no federally regulated standards for natural foods, which means the definition can vary. For example, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) defines natural beef and chicken as meat that “has no artificial ingredients or added colors and was not fundamentally altered during processing.”² This definition is exclusive to meat and does not apply to anything else, which means companies that produce other foods have significant flexibility when labeling their products.

Organic products, on the other hand, are federally regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). In order to qualify as organic, foods have to meet specific processing standards and growing standards.³ These requirements include:

Processing Standards	Growing Standards
No artificial colors or flavors	No toxic and persistent pesticides
No artificial preservatives	No synthetic growth hormones
No irradiates products/ingredients	No petroleum-based fertilizers
No GMOs	No cloning

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Because of the federal regulations that extend to growth and production standards, organic foods are usually better for the environment. In other words, eating organic has the benefit of feeding your family well and the long-term advantage of supporting the earth.

When you're deciding between natural and organic products at the grocery store, you might be tempted to opt for cheaper natural items. However, while being wise with your finances is important, the extra expense for organic products can offer you peace of mind. Since natural foods are labeled at the discretion of the seller, what you are purchasing might not always be an accurate depiction of its true quality.

Labels Explained: Identifying the Best Products

To tell whether something is organic according to the USDA, look at the label. In order to mark their agricultural products as organic, growers must be able to prove that the item they're selling is made up of at least 95% organic ingredients, with no synthetic growth hormones, antibiotics, pesticides, biotechnology, synthetic ingredients, or irradiation from production to processing.⁴ Foods that meet these requirements have an official USDA seal on the label.



Over the past few years, farmers from smaller-scale businesses have expressed frustration with the cost required to get certified by the USDA. They go through all the processes to raise animals and grow crops without any additives or synthetic ingredients, but they can't justify spending the money to participate in the USDA's program. As a result, the non-profit Certified Naturally Grown was founded to provide a peer-reviewed, non-governmental certification system where farmers act as inspectors for each other.⁵ The Certified Naturally Grown seal differentiates sellers that grow their food using the same standards required by the USDA's National Organic Program from sellers that only want to use "natural" as a promotional tactic.

If you don't see an official seal on a product's label, there is no way to tell which preservatives or synthetic additives may have been used in the planting, growing, or packaging processes. As you're reviewing your options in the grocery store, don't fall for marketing that insists on "all-natural ingredients" unless you see a corresponding official seal.

Advertising Messages: Spotting the Truth

In an effort to influence your purchasing decisions, many companies will boast "natural" or "organic" ingredients, sugarcoating their products' value. However, if you know what to look for, you can spot credible brands from the rest. Put these recommendations into practice next time you're at the supermarket.

1. Check the ingredients list. As a best practice, try to find foods that have a maximum of five ingredients. The more items on the list, the higher the likelihood that the final product is processed. Some brands will also disguise the amount of sugar their foods contain by listing different sugars as separate ingredients. Sugar can go by more than 60 names, so look closely to make sure you know exactly what you're consuming.⁶ Ask yourself if you would typically find a product's listed ingredients in your pantry at home. If the answer is no, you probably don't want to put those ingredients in your body.

2. Purchase products that are in their natural state. This is why shopping in farmers' markets has a significant advantage over the standard supermarket. Local producers can provide you with a farm-to-table experience; they don't normally over-process their products or add extra chemicals to keep them ripe before being shipped around the country. Even if a farmer sells you packaged food, such as tomatoes canned in water and salt, it is likely preserved healthily and naturally.

3. Know your buzzwords. Avoid blindly trusting the descriptions on a package. If a word catches your eye as potentially beneficial, be sure to scrutinize the product and its ingredients instead of assuming the claims are true. A few words to keep in mind include:⁷

- Natural
- Heart-healthy
- Chemical-free
- Non-toxic
- Sustainable
- No preservatives
- Humane

4. Don't fall for visual appeal. Think about the last food commercial you saw, whether it was a new cereal brand or a flavor of ice cream. When you're at the store, you might remember the ad and feel impelled to make a purchase. But when it comes to food advertising, seeing isn't believing. In fact, commercials feature plenty of stand-ins for the real deal, such as glue used as milk in cereal ads or motor oil being made to look like honey.⁸ Instead of falling for shiny packaging and advertisement temptations, look past the messaging to find the actual value of the product you want to buy.

Eating Organic: Is it Worth It?

Even when you know a product is organic, you might not know whether it's worth the investment. Do organic foods really offer that many more benefits than conventionally grown items? While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to establishing a healthy diet, there are several upsides to prioritizing organic purchases.

Fewer Pesticides

Because foods cannot qualify as organic if they're grown with pesticides, buying USDA-approved products can reduce your exposure to the harmful chemicals often contained in these pesticides. A lack of synthetic fertilizers can also result in low residue levels in the food and lower pesticide exposure for consumers.⁹ The chemicals in pesticides can also affect the natural wildlife surrounding farms, which means eliminating pesticides can ultimately benefit the environment in addition to our wellness.¹⁰

More Nutrients

Food that is grown without genetic modifications or dangerous pesticides thrives in soil that contains critical microbial life.¹¹ As a result, organic foods have been shown to have higher antioxidant levels. Additionally, some studies have indicated that organic meats have more nutrients, including omega-3 fatty acids.¹²

Fresher Flavors

Since organic foods don't have preservatives, you can be more confident in their freshness. While the organic label doesn't guarantee better flavor, it does ensure that there are no artificial additives, which means everything you get is purely natural.

One word of caution, especially in the snack aisle: don't assume that something labeled as organic is *automatically* the perfect choice. Consider the main ingredients. For example, if you are trying to cut back on white flour, refined sugar, and vegetable oil, then buying a pack of organic cookies made from these three ingredients may not be a good decision. In other words, stick to the foods and ingredients that nourish your body. A label of "USDA Organic" is a great place to start, but you should always evaluate how a product fits with your health goals.

Conclusion

As you make decisions about the best foods for your family, it's essential to consider nutrition labels carefully so you don't get sucked into misleading advertising. If you're passionate about establishing healthy eating habits that equip your mind, body, and spirit to thrive, take the next step in your wellness journey by becoming a Certified Nutritional Consultant. Our team at Trinity School of Natural Health can help you get started. Call 800-428-0408, option 2, to talk to an enrollment specialist.

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