



# Understanding Tricky Food Labels

There are certain terms that food companies use to promote a product that can be hard to understand. When looking at food packaging, do a little detective work to find out whether the claim that is being made really makes the food a better choice.

Looking at the nutrition facts panel and the ingredients list is usually a good start. It is also helpful to focus on choosing products that more closely resemble the foods they are made from.

Use the following information to guide you as you come across tricky terms on food labels:

## Multigrain or Made with Whole Grains

Look at the ingredients list and check that a whole grain (e.g. whole wheat, brown rice, quinoa, oats) is the first ingredient listed. Aim for at least 3 grams of fiber per serving.

## Sugar-Free

These foods may naturally contain sugar, other carbohydrates, or artificial sweeteners. Check the label to see what you are really getting. If you have diabetes, look at total carbohydrate amount instead of sugar.

Sugar-free products often contain sugar alcohols, which are not calorie-free and can still raise your blood sugar to some extent. Sugar alcohols can also cause cramping and diarrhea, so do not eat a lot at one time. Look for words ending in “-ol” (e.g. sorbitol, mannitol).

## Light

This term may refer to the flavor (e.g. olive oil) or the color (e.g. brown sugar) of a product, and not calorie or fat content.

## No Sugar Added

Some foods naturally contain sugar, as well as calories and possibly other carbohydrates. Carbohydrates from added sugar, natural sugar, and starches will all affect your blood sugar.

## Immunity Booster

Companies use words like “immunity blend” or “supports the immune system” if a product contains certain vitamins or minerals. This alone does not make the product a healthy option.

## Lightly Sweetened

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not define this term. It is simply referring to the taste of a product and does not tell you about the amount of sugar or sweetener.

## All Natural

These foods may still have naturally-sourced additives and preservatives (e.g. salt, sugar).

## Organic

If a product has a “USDA organic” label, 95% or more of the ingredients must have been grown or processed without synthetic fertilizers or pesticides (among other standards).

A label that says “made with organic ingredients” must have a minimum of 70% all ingredients that meet the standard.

## Made with Real Fruit

Products that claim to be made with real fruit may not contain very much at all, or none of the type(s) pictured on the box.

## Free Range

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) definition of “free range” is having exposure to the outdoors. There are no requirements for the amount, duration, and quality of outdoor access. If this is important to you, look for “pasture-raised” eggs instead.

## No Trans Fat or Zero Grams (0 g) Trans Fat

Products that say “no trans fat” or “0g trans fat” can actually contain 0 - 0.5 grams per serving. Check for words on the ingredient list such as partially hydrogenated oils and shortening, which mean trans fat is still present.

## Gluten-Free

Gluten-free products are becoming easier to find, which is great for those with gluten intolerance. For everyone else though, there is no particular advantage to buying them. Gluten-free products may actually have less fiber than the regular version.

## Cholesterol-Free

The amount and types of fat in a product have a greater influence on your blood cholesterol numbers than dietary cholesterol itself.

## Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Omega-3 fatty acids come in three main types: Eicosapentaenoic (EPA), docosahexaenoic (DHA), and alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). ALA does not have the strong proven benefit that EPA and DHA have. The body can convert ALA to EPA and DHA, but this is not efficient.

Choose fatty (cold water) fish, grass-fed dairy products, grass-fed and pasture-raised meat and poultry, algae, and seaweed products for sources of EPA and DHA.

## Reduced Sodium

Reduced sodium products contains at least 25% less sodium than the original version of the product. This does not guarantee that the product is actually low-sodium, which is defined as 140mg or less sodium per serving. For example, reduced-sodium (lite) soy sauce has around 550mg sodium in a tablespoon, compared to regular soy which has around 825 mg.

## Low-Fat or Fat-Free

With the exception of dairy products, low-fat or fat-free products sometimes contain as many calories as full-fat versions. They could also include extra sugar and salt to improve taste and texture. Check the label and compare it to the full-fat version.

## Reduced Fat (Dairy Products)

Whole milk has about 3% milk fat, while reduced fat milk has just a little less at 2%. It is recommended that adults choose low-fat (1%) or nonfat (skim) dairy products. It is also important to note that most cow milk at the store has Vitamin D added to it, not just whole milk.

## Serving Size

The serving size listed for the product might be different than what you might serve yourself. Keep this in mind when looking at the information on the nutrition facts panel.