

Watch Out For “Natural” Labels

Natural is arguably one the most misleading claims used on food labels. It conjures up a whole host of assumptions about the health benefits and purity of a product, but it is essentially a claim that doesn't have much meaning.

A recent survey of more than 1,000 people from the Consumer Reports National Research Center found that 59 percent of respondents look for the claim when they're food shopping. And more than 75 percent of them attribute specific meanings to the word, such as contains no artificial ingredients, artificial colors, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs); or for meat and poultry, that the animals were never given antibiotics or that they had access to the outdoors. However this is not necessarily true.

According to the USDA, food can only be labeled natural if it contains no artificial ingredients or added colors and is minimally processed. Furthermore, the label must clearly spell this definition out, so that consumers are not misled by the “natural” label. For example, animal products raised with the use of artificial hormones can be labeled natural. So can genetically modified organisms. Most importantly, natural does not mean organic, although many companies would like consumers to think it does. Organic food has a stringent set of requirements, policies, and procedures that must be followed for certification. These requirements are much more explicit and in depth than the single paragraph definition used for “natural.”

Food labeling is an extremely complex and growing issue in the United States, with consumers clamoring for sustainable foods and companies eager to supply them, or at least to lead consumers into believing that they are purchasing healthy products. Consumers are advised to read the entire label on a product labeled natural, to see what else it might contain.

Please schedule a free consultation to go over any questions you may have.

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