

Misleading Labels

Food safety expert explains how terms such as ‘natural’ and ‘healthy’ aren’t regulated. FDA comment period open until May 2016.

by **James Schmidt**, Kansas State University

Certain food labeling and marketing claims can be misleading.

With the amount of food that is currently processed in the United States, many consumers believe it is important to know the ingredients in the foods they eat. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the USDA, working with relevant state and local agencies, are responsible for holding food producers accountable for food products sold in stores. However, regulating farmers’ market vendors and individual sellers can be difficult for regulators, which makes it important for consumers to ask for information.

“It’s definitely important that consumers are informed about the food they are buying,” said Londa Nwadike, consumer food safety specialist for Kansas State University (K-State) Research and Extension and the University of Missouri (MU) Extension. “We want to make sure that consumers are buying their food based on actual facts.”

The FDA and USDA have standards in place for certain marketing claims that food companies make. If the product meets these standards, it can legally use those claims on its label and in marketing materials.

“If something is certified organic, and it has the USDA organic seal on it, then we know that it has met certain criteria,” Nwadike said. “If something just says ‘grown organically’ at a farmers’ market, for example, you’ll have to ask the farmer what that means and what sort of practices he or she was using.”

Knowing the terms that are regulated can prove beneficial to a healthful diet. Marketing terms that are nutrition claims, such as “low-fat” or “high in calcium,” are regulated closely, according to Nwadike. However, there are many misleading or non-regulated terms.

“It’s the more general terms such as ‘local,’ ‘sustainable’ and ‘artisan’ that do not have a regulated definition,” Nwadike said. “The FDA also does not have any definition for the term ‘natural.’”

The word “natural” has been controversial, as it is difficult to define when referring to food. What exactly constitutes a natural food?



► Since many vendors at farmers’ markets are not regulated by the FDA or USDA, it is important for consumers to ask for information about the foods they purchase.

“Currently, the FDA has an open comment period, which goes until May 2016, to allow consumers and food businesses to make comments on if there should be a definition for ‘natural’ and what that definition should be,” Nwadike said. “Those are going to be difficult discussions I think, because there’s such a wide range of ideas about what ‘natural’ is. In fact, there are some consumers who have filed complaints against the FDA saying the term ‘natural’ should be banned, because how can we really say if a food is ‘natural’ or not?”

Understanding food labels

Currently, there are four items that must be on a label. They include:

- Name of the product;
- Statement of responsibility, stating who made the product or who is taking responsibility for it;
- Quantity statement so consumers know exactly how much they are buying; and
- Statement of ingredients. This includes clearly stating any of the eight major food allergens, if used.

It’s also important to note that nutrition facts aren’t always included with certain products.

“The nutrition facts might be included if (producers) meet certain requirements,” Nwadike said. “If it’s a larger producer or if they’re making a nutrition claim, then they must have nutrition facts.”

She cautions food buyers that any terms that don’t have official, regulated definitions are mainly used for marketing. So when buying, it’s important to know the distinction between what has to be on the label and what is there to make the product look good.

More information about food labels is available at local extension offices throughout Kansas.



Editor’s Note: James Schmidt is a student writer for K-State Research and Extension.