

Just how natural is a food labeled “natural”?

Organically labeled foods have a specific definition.

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As you shop your favorite grocery store, do you lean toward foods that are labeled “natural”? What exactly does natural mean? Do you assume it means non-GMO, or produced without hormones or pesticides? The answer is, not necessarily. How do foods get these labels anyway?

Most food labels are regulated by the [Food and Drug Administration](http://www.fda.gov/) (<http://www.fda.gov/>), who is responsible for assuring that foods sold in the United States are safe, wholesome and properly labeled. Whenever a food manufacturer wishes to make a health claim, it has to meet specific regulations established by the FDA. However, the term natural has no definition, yet is widely used.

According to the [Hartman Group](http://www.hartman-group.com/acumenPdfs/organic-natural-distinctions-2016-11-10.pdf?utm_content=cummin13@msu.edu&utm_keyword=JdgRXjuCPI0c9TCD9E6c&utm_source=tailoredmail&utm_term=Click+to+view+full+infographic%26nbsc) (http://www.hartman-group.com/acumenPdfs/organic-natural-distinctions-2016-11-10.pdf?utm_content=cummin13@msu.edu&utm_keyword=JdgRXjuCPI0c9TCD9E6c&utm_source=tailoredmail&utm_term=Click+to+view+full+infographic%26nbsc) “There is considerable consternation among consumers when they encounter the terms ‘organic’ and ‘natural’. They are two terms that have come to mean so many things to consumers that they now represent no one thing for everyone.”

A recent [Consumer Reports](#) ([pdf](#)) survey of 1,005 adults found that more than half of consumers usually seek out products with a natural food label, often in the belief that they are produced without hormones, pesticides and artificial ingredients.

How about organic? If you see the “USDA Organic” or “Certified Organic” seal on your food, the contents should be 95 percent or more [certified organic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organic_certification) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organic_certification), which means free of synthetic additives like pesticides, chemical fertilizers and dyes, and must not be processed using industrial solvents, irradiation or genetic engineering, [according to the USDA](http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/NOPConsumers) (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/NOPConsumers>).

A variation of the term organic is “100% organic”, which means all of the ingredients must meet the guidelines above. The phrase, “made with organic”, means that the ingredients must contain 70 percent or more organic ingredients, and the remaining 30 percent of the ingredients may not be foods processed with additives on a special exclusion list. For the latter, the USDA seal cannot be used anywhere on the package.

Because of strict growing regulations, organic foods are often more expensive to produce and, thus, carry a higher price tag at the grocery store. The individual consumer must research the benefits and decide if the higher price tag is worth it for them.

For food manufacturers seeking to appeal to today’s health conscious consumer, they will do well to remember the following: “Consumers are changing the way they think about food, shifting their food preferences based on environmental reasons, animal rights or dietary restrictions. Others are aiming to live overall healthier lifestyles,” (Mintel, a leading market intelligence agency). A meaningful label will go a long way in gaining credibility with the consumer.

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