


# Savvier shoppers see through misleading food labels. Here's how.

 [washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/shoppers-are-getting-savvier-to-these-misleading-food-labels/2017/12/12/de40c7dc-d555-11e7-a986-d0a9770d9a3e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/shoppers-are-getting-savvier-to-these-misleading-food-labels/2017/12/12/de40c7dc-d555-11e7-a986-d0a9770d9a3e_story.html)  
By Cara Rosenbloom

---

(iStock)

In the quest for health, many of us search for products that have an edge over their competition. If something is proclaimed to be “organic” or “natural,” we often think it’s healthier for us. Marketers hope these on-pack words will influence our buying decisions.

Marketing can be misleading. Product packages can bear overinflated claims about health benefits to make foods sound more nutritious than they are. For years, consumers falsely believed claims like “natural” and “no sugar added” meant a product was better for their health, but this is beginning to change. Shoppers are becoming savvier and are seeing right through marketing gimmicks like these:

**Food labeled as “natural:”** Market research company The Hartman Group says words like “natural” and “clean” on food packages are increasingly being seen as “pretentious and neurotic” and will be used less often by food manufacturers. Consumers are realizing “natural” doesn’t mean very much. Technically, products can be loaded with sugar or high fructose corn syrup, but since those are made from sugar cane, beets or corn (all plants), they are still “natural.”

*[\[Nine positive food messages to send yourself over the holidays\]](#)*

Citizen-led petitions have requested the FDA review the term “natural” and regulate its use. There is no [formal FDA definition](#), but the agency is investigating whether and how it should define the term.

0:00

Copy

## 30 mouth-watering recipes approved by health experts

---

View Photos

---

Dietitian Ellie Krieger, Nourish Schools co-founder Casey Seidenberg and certified health education specialist Elaine Gordon offer picks for everything from breakfast to dessert.

The Hartman Group says four out of five consumers have ambivalence or outright distrust of the “natural” claim. Real foods that are “natural” should be obvious — like apples or almonds. Consumers are increasingly becoming skeptical when processed foods have this label, because intuitively, it does not make sense.

**Labeling what’s not there:** “Wow,” said my 6-year-old son at the grocery store. “These chips have no cholesterol!” Sounds healthy, right? Hold on. Cholesterol is a waxy fatlike substance that is only found in animal-based foods. So potatoes, oil and salt will never have cholesterol.

That’s not as bad as bottled water that is labeled as “non-GMO, gluten-free and kosher” (yes, this exists). Is this to distinguish it from all other bottled waters that are filled with wheat and pork? *Please.*

Companies advertise what’s “not” in their foods to exploit the knowledge gap that consumers have. It’s natural for a shopper to assume if a food “does not contain” something, that’s a good thing (even if they have no idea what it means). Marketers prey on consumer vulnerabilities, then charge a premium for products that never contained that “evil” ingredient in the first place.

According to Mintel’s 2018 Global Food & Drink Trends report, consumers are increasingly looking for “complete and total transparency from food and drink companies.” They want to know what’s in their food, not what’s missing. They’re curious about where food comes from, how it was grown and how it can impact their health. They want food companies to deliver accurate information in an honest way.

**Health-washing junk food:** Kraft Macaroni & Cheese now comes in an organic version. Same with Doritos. “Organic” is a method of farming, not a health claim. Organic junk food is no healthier for your body than products made from conventionally-grown ingredients. So why bother creating these products? Perhaps they give permission to health-conscious consumers to give into junk food cravings but feel less guilty about it.

Words like “organic” and “GMO-free” appeared on almost 30 percent of new product launches in the past year, compared with just 17 percent of products a decade ago. It may be slowing down. According to the Hartman Group, organic is still seen as a symbol of quality, but its expansion into big brands making processed food has diluted the appeal and reduced trust in organic claims.

*[When healing’s needed, seek out these immunity-boosting foods]*

**Fake “no sugar added” claims:** This is a big one in the beverage world, where juice that contains as much sugar as soft drinks can claim “no sugar added.” It’s a nuanced term. What consumers should know is 8 oz. of apple juice and 8 oz. of cola have the same amount of sugar (about six teaspoons). It doesn’t matter if it’s natural or added sugar when it’s being guzzled in huge quantities.

A lawsuit against PepsiCo's Naked Juice said the company misled consumers by featuring the "no sugar added" statement. Adjustments are being made. PepsiCo will proceed with label changes including reducing the text size on the "no sugar added" claim (which they still get to make — for now), and they will have to include a statement saying the product is "not a low-calorie food."

Where do all of the calories come from? Sugar.

Lean & Fit newsletter

Fitness and wellness trends in your inbox weekly.

Even the biggest consumer packaged goods companies are seeing consumer trust is waning. Pepsi is changing labels for more transparency. Nestlé and Campbell's are severing ties with the powerful food industry trade group Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), which lobbies against consumer demands like mandatory labeling of added sugar and GMO ingredients. Change is happening.

Company executives who listen to what consumers want will drive the shift toward honest labels. As consumers, we need to keep pushing for honesty and transparency in marketing, because it seems to be working. Slowly.

Registered dietitian Cara Rosenbloom is president of Words to Eat By, a nutrition communications company specializing in writing, nutrition education and recipe development. She is the co-author of "Nourish: Whole Food Recipes Featuring Seeds, Nuts and Beans."