Consumers often are overwhelmed and confused by the number of choices offered in today’s meat case. In addition to choosing from different cuts, packaging types, weights, and prices, consumers are faced with numerous marketing claims presented on the label or at the point of sale. These claims are designed to give the consumer more information about the product so they can make the purchasing decision that best suits their needs. But what do these different marketing claims mean and what are the differences? The list below provides information on several common marketing claims to better assist consumers with their meat purchasing decisions. Note that unless otherwise indicated, the listed labeling terms are regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

### Animal Production Claims

Many marketing claims found on meat labels provide information about how the animal that produced the product was raised, including the following:

#### Natural/Naturally Raised

Many consumers believe that meat labeled as “Natural” is synonymous with meat labeled as “Naturally Raised”; however, these claims have different meanings. The term “Natural” refers only to how a meat product was processed and does not refer to how an animal was raised. To be labeled as “Natural,” a product must be minimally processed, cannot contain any artificial ingredients, and cannot contain preservatives. The label must also include a statement clarifying the intended meaning, such as: “no artificial ingredients” or “minimally processed.”
processed.” Almost all fresh meat sold meets the requirements for the “Natural” claim. The product may be sliced, ground, frozen, or even cooked and still meet the “Natural” claim definition.

The term “Naturally Raised” refers to how the animal was produced. Products labeled as “Naturally Raised” are required to be from animals raised entirely without growth promoting products, antibiotics, and never fed animal or fish by-products. However, animals are allowed to be vaccinated and given products to control parasites.

**Organic**

The USDA oversees the National Organic Program (NOP), which is the governing body responsible for administering standards for all organic agricultural products, including meat. All meat labeled as “Certified Organic” or “USDA Organic” must be certified to have met all of the requirements stipulated by the NOP:

- Have been raised under organic management techniques from the last third of gestation; for poultry, since the second day of life.
- Have been fed a 100 percent USDA Organic grain or forage diet.
- Have never received growth promotants, hormonal implants, parasiticides, or antibiotics.
- Have been given access to the outdoors for all livestock and access to pasture for cattle.

Additionally, organic meat products must be processed in a facility certified to process organic products. Organic meats must be kept separate from non-organic meats throughout processing and must be processed at a different time from conventional products. Also, all equipment must be washed thoroughly between processing of organic and conventional products.

All organic meat products must be inspected for wholesomeness by federal or state inspection agencies, the same as conventional products. No documented differences in food safety or presence of any foodborne pathogens (such as *E. coli* O157:H7 or *Salmonella*) exist between organic and conventional meats. Moreover, there is no scientific evidence to suggest any nutritional differences between conventional and organic meat products.

Animals that become sick during production must be administered appropriate medications and removed from the organic program. All meat products that meet the “Certified Organic” claim are labeled with the official USDA Organic seal.

**Raised Without Antibiotics**

Antibiotics are commonly used in livestock production for many of the same reasons they are used in human medicine. Antibiotics are commonly used to treat, control, and prevent diseases in livestock. Additionally, certain antibiotics can be used to modify the types of bacteria found in the animal’s gut and can help the animal more efficiently convert feed to muscle and improve growth. However, in 2012 the FDA asked livestock producers to begin phasing out the use of antibiotics for the sole purpose of improved animal growth.

Meat items labeled as “Raised without antibiotics” or “No antibiotics administered” were produced from animals that never received antibiotics throughout their lifetimes. The claim “Antibiotic free” is not approved for use in meat products. This is because the USDA tests all meat products and prevents the sale of any meat found to have antibiotic residues. Thus, all meat sold in the United States is “Antibiotic free.”

**Raised Without Added Hormones**

Hormones are produced by the cells in all animals and plants. Therefore, they are naturally occurring in all meat and many other agricultural food products, regardless of production methods. Because of this, the term “Hormone Free” is not approved for use on labels.

Often, hormones are administered to cattle during feeding to improve growth, but this is not required by any label. Thus, the term “Growth Promoted” is not approved for use on labels.
their ability to convert feed into muscle and allow for
the production of more beef with fewer resources. The
hormones used are the same as, or may be synthetic
versions of, the hormones produced naturally by the
animal, such as estrogen. Additionally, the amount
of estrogen found in a 3-ounce serving of beef from
cattle administered an estrogen implant is less than
the amount naturally found in the same size serving
of potatoes, cabbage, eggs, soybeans, or ice cream, and
is only a small fraction (0.001 to 0.0004 percent) of
the amount naturally produced daily by men, women,
and children.

Still, some consumers prefer to purchase beef from
animals never administered additional hormones.
The terms “Raised without added hormones” or “No
hormones administered” indicate that the beef was
produced from animals that were never given any
additional hormones. Hormones are only approved
for use in beef and lamb production in the United
States Therefore, all pork, poultry, and veal animals
are raised without added hormones. To clarify this
for consumers, pork or poultry products labeled as
“Raised without added hormones” must be immediately
followed by “Federal regulations prohibit the use of
hormones in poultry/pork.” The additional wording
is required to prevent companies from misleading
consumers into believing the product was raised
differently from a competitor’s product and thus
warrants a higher price.

Grass-Fed
Almost all cattle are grass-fed for a majority of
their lives. Calves normally graze
on grass pasture
alongside their
mother for several
months before
weaning. Following
weaning, many
cattle remain on
pasture consuming
grass or other
forages for an
additional amount
of time to increase
weight before
placement in a
feedlot. In the
United States, the majority of cattle are placed in
a feedlot and fed a balanced, high-energy diet for
the final 4 to 6 months of their lives. This diet often
includes corn, soybeans, forage, and is fortified with
vitamins and minerals required by the animals for
proper health.

Some beef, however, is produced from animals that
were fed an all-grass diet their entire lives. The USDA
requires beef labeled as “Grass-Fed” to be from cattle
whose diet, post-weaning, was comprised entirely of
forage from a pasture or harvested forage and that
animals were given continuous access to pasture
during the growing season.

Grass-fed beef is typically much leaner and darker
in color than beef from grain-finished cattle. This
leanness often results in beef that is tougher and drier
than grain-finished beef. Grass-fed beef has a unique
flavor profile desired by some consumers. The flavor
of grass-fed beef is often much stronger than grain-
finished beef and is more similar to the flavor of wild
game meat.

Free-Range
The label claim
“Free-range” or
“Free-roaming”
indicates the
animal had access
to an outdoor area
during production.
For poultry,
these claims are
regulated by the
USDA and require
the animals to have
daily access to an
outdoor area. The
outdoor area may
be fenced and/
or covered with a
netting material for
protection. The term is not regulated by the USDA
for beef, pork, and lamb production. If the term is
used, however, it must be limited to animals that were
never confined to a feedlot.

Not Fed Animal By-Products/Fed an All Vegetarian Diet
“Not fed animal by-products” and “Fed an all
vegetarian diet” are labeling claims most commonly
associated with poultry. Some poultry feed rations
will include processed protein and fats and oils from
meat and poultry by-products. Meat labeled as “Not
fed animal by-products” is from animals whose feed
Product Claims

A number of claims that appear on labels give consumers information about the characteristics of the meat product itself. These claims often give consumers an indication of the quality or expected eating experience of the product.

USDA Grade

The most common product-related marketing claim found on meat labels is the USDA grade. For beef, USDA grade plays a large role in eating satisfaction. Prime, Choice, and Select are termed “quality grades” and are used to segregate beef into categories of expected eating satisfaction. These grades are determined by official USDA graders who evaluate the beef for several factors. Marbling (the flecks of fat within the meat) is the most important factor considered for grading. The more marbling the cut has, the higher the grade and the better the expected eating experience.

Prime is the highest quality grade and produces the most tender, juicy, and flavorful eating experience. About 4 percent of beef produced in the United States qualify for this grade. Because of this, Prime beef receives the highest price and is often only sold at premium steak houses. Prime beef is rarely sold in grocery stores or meat markets.

Choice and Select are the two quality grades of beef most commonly sold at retail. Choice is a higher grade than Select and produces a more consistently satisfying eating experience. Most retailers offer a premium beef line that is typically USDA Choice. Much of the lower-priced beef at retail is Select grade. Select beef can produce a satisfying eating experience, but is inconsistent and more likely to be dry and tough if the meat is overcooked.
Many times retailers will not label their products with the USDA grade for various reasons. This does not mean that the beef is ungraded or has a lower grade. You can always ask the meat department personnel and they should be able to tell you the grade. Selecting beef cuts with a greater amount of marbling results in a more tender, juicy, and flavorful eating experience.

Grading standards are used for other meat products as well. However, unlike beef, these grades are not commonly seen at retail. All poultry sold at retail is grade “A,” the highest grade for chicken and turkey. All lower-grade poultry is used for further-processed products that are cut up, ground, or chopped.

**No Additives**

Food additives are commonly added to foods to improve taste, texture, shelf life, nutritional value, or appearance of a product. Common additives include salt, sugar, and corn syrup. All additives must be included on the ingredient statement of food products, including meat. Because of this, the claim “No additives” may be used on meat labels, but has not been defined by the USDA or FDA.

Many meat products, specifically poultry and pork, are injected with a saline solution to improve eating quality. The additional moisture helps produce a more tender and juicy eating experience and helps maintain palatability if meats are overcooked. Meats enhanced with such a solution must be clearly stated on the label. Statements may include “Enhanced with up to 10% chicken broth” or “Contains up to 8% of a solution of water, salt, and spices to enhance tenderness and juiciness.” The USDA estimates that up to 30 percent of poultry, 15 percent of beef, and 90 percent of pork sold at retail contain added solutions. In addition to being clearly stated on the label, the ingredients of these solutions must be included on the ingredients panel.

**Fresh, Never Frozen**

Many meat products, both in retail and foodservice (restaurants, cafeterias, etc.), are marketed as “Fresh, Never Frozen.” Products labeled with this claim have never been frozen from the time the animal was harvested. Though freezing has no adverse effects on food safety and quality, some consumers prefer to purchase meat items that have never been frozen.

**Breed Claims**

Often a product label will include the breed of the animal that produced the product. Different breeds within each species have different quality characteristics and produce different eating experiences. In beef, common breeds marketed include Angus, Hereford, and Wagyu; and in pork, Duroc and Berkshire are common. Each of these breeds are associated with high-quality products that produce a superior eating experience.

Breed claims are verified by the USDA to ensure that all products receiving the claim meet breed-specific requirements. Additionally, most products identified with a breed claim must meet other specifications, including marbling, muscling, fat, and age requirements. These additional requirements help guarantee consumers receive an eating experience indicative of the labeled breed.

**Tenderness Claims**

Tenderness is the most important trait affecting overall beef eating satisfaction. To help consumers identify beef products that will meet their tenderness expectations, the USDA has approved the claims “Certified Tender” and “Certified Very Tender.”
Products labeled with these claims are tested and certified by USDA to meet national tenderness standards. These claims allow consumers to have confidence in the tenderness of the product before purchasing. Beef labeled as “Certified Very Tender” is required to be more tender than beef eligible for only the “Certified Tender” claim. Currently, no such standards exist for pork or poultry products.

Aging Claims
Some meat products, specifically beef, are labeled with various aging claims. Most commonly these claims identify the amount of time the product has been “aged.” The term aging describes the amount of time a product is held, under refrigerated conditions, in a fresh state before freezing or cooking. As meat ages, naturally occurring enzymes break down structural proteins and improve tenderness. In general, longer-aged meat products have improved eating characteristics. Aging times of retail beef range from 7 to 35 days. Product with an aging claim typically would state “aged for at least 21 days” or similar.

Some product sold at retail is labeled as “dry-aged” and often sells for a premium price. These products typically have been aged for 28 to 35 days without packaging, to expose the meat surface to open air. This process allows for moisture loss and surface dehydration. The result is a product with a unique flavor profile described as nutty, buttery, and rich. Many top steak houses only serve “dry-aged” product to give their customers this unique beef-eating experience.

Branded Products
Historically, meat was sold as a commodity item. This allowed for a large amount of variation in product quality between similar items. More recently, an increasing amount of meat has been marketed under specific brand names. Certified branded programs allow for improved consistency, predictability, and reduced variability among products. Each has a set of specifications the product must meet to be sold under the brand. The USDA oversees these programs and verifies that all products meet the brand requirements. Common criteria include animal breed type, marbling level, fat thickness, and muscle size. These criteria allow for branded programs to create a uniform, consistent product that consumers can rely on for repeatable and expected eating results.

Religious Harvest Claims
Two product categories relating to religious harvest are commonly found in meat products. Meat products labeled as “Kosher” are from animals that were harvested under rabbinical supervision and meet all requirements according to Jewish law. Products labeled as “Halal” were harvested and processed according to Islamic law and under Islamic authority. In addition to fresh meat products, processed meat products meeting these requirements also may be labeled accordingly.
References and other resources:


