All Food Labels Are ***Not*** Created Equal

Recently, I have received several questions and comments concerning the many different food labels found at the grocery store.

There is a wide variety of meat; primarily beef, at the meat counter such as: ***Hormone Free, Grass Fed, Natural, Naturally raised, organic and ground beef***. With the help of USDA’s official definitions and laws and Dr. Janel Yancy, a meat scientist at the University Of Arkansas and her blog page “Mom at the meat counter”. The following are explanations of these labels. This could be a lengthy series of definitions and requirements, so bear with us.

**Hormone Free**: There is ***NO*** such item. All animals, even our own bodies, have natural hormones that are needed for growth and to raise meat, milk, eggs and babies. All food contains hormones, nothing can be hormone free. Technically, meat milk and eggs can not be labeled hormone free. Also, in the US it’s against the federal regulations to use hormones to raise pork or poultry, only the natural hormones that already occur in their bodies.

Beef, it is legal to administer hormones to cattle. These hormones are closely related to the hormones cattle produce naturally. These hormones permit cattle to gain weight quicker, use less feed, and water. Thus they are more efficient and use fewer natural resources.

The FDA and USDA regulate how and where these hormones (implants) maybe used. These implants are placed in the animals ear and most are used in the later days before harvest; thus, a leaner animal.

A comparison of cattle raised with or without hormones, the level in beef is **only slightly** different: 8oz steak was 5.1 nano grams and without 3.5 nano grams***. A nano gram is 1 billionth of a gram.*** The 8oz steak is just over 226 grams.

**Grass Fed**: To label a package of beef grass fed, USDA requires that the cattle are:

1. Only permitted to eat grass their entire life.

2. Never given or fed grains or grain by-products.

3. Allowed access to graze grass pastures during the growing season.

4. During the winter cattle are fed hay. Hay being grass harvested and stored for future cattle feeding.

Many people believe or think that beef that isn’t labeled grass fed comes from cattle that have never grazed grass pastures. All cattle in the US have been grass fed or grazed grass pastures at some time during their lives.

Why?

All cattle are ruminate animals. Their complex digestive system permits them to harvest and digest grass, converting it to energy for growth and producing meat, milk and raising calves. That’s whets unique about the cow.

**Grain Fed**: Calves are born and live with their mothers for the first 7-9 months of life. Calves maybe fed a limited amount of grain during this time but primarily drink Mothers milk and eat grass.

When calves reach an age to be weaned, they begin a stocker or grower phase of life, that being to eat grass and gain weight for a few months. They may receive limited grains during this time but that depends on the weather and season of the year. If grass is growing they eat grass, if not they eat a combination of harvested grass (hay) and grains.

In their final stage of life, calves will move to a feed yard there they will be fed a ration of food combination of grains for finishing, until it is time to harvest. These grains permit calves to gain weight efficiently while adding flavor and tenderness to the meat. Even though calves receive hay, as it would be un-healthy for calves to eat only grains. They must receive a balanced meal or feed.

**Natural**: A label we see on lots of food items today. USDA defines natural as a meat product that has no or does not contain:

1. Artificial color or flavoring

2. Coloring ingredient

3. Chemical preservative

4. Artificial or synthetic ingredient

5. Is minimally processed in such a manner that does not fundamentally alter the product. Meat, milk or eggs labeled natural can not be altered during processing.

The term natural refers to the meat itself and how it was processed. It has NOTHING to do with how the animal was raised. The term natural should be further explained as:

1 no artificial ingredients

2 minimally processed

3 natural grasses fed or grain fed

4 natural (grown) raised without antibiotics, all fresh meats are eligible for the term natural regardless of how the animal was raised.

There is no governing body such as USDA’s marketing service for natural products like there is for naturally raised or organic.

**Naturally Raised**:

Is defined by USDA and has a different meaning that the term natural. Naturally raised animals are raised without the use of:

1. Growth promotants

2. Antibiotics

3. Animal by-products

Does Not Contain:

1. Artificial ingredients

2. Coloring ingredients

3. Chemical ingredients

4. Synthetic ingredients

The tern naturally raised does not meat the animal was exclusively grass fed, was or was not raised in confinement. The naturally raised animal may have been only grass fed or may have been fed grains in a feed yard for a few months.

Naturally raised does have a certification program and all products must be certified by USDA’s marketing service or its agencies.

 **Organic:** USDA’s marketing service or its agencies manages the National Organic Program (NOP) which certifies farmers/ranchers that raise and handle organic produce. Organically raised livestock must be in compliance with NOP rules and regulations beginning at the last 1/3 or tri-mester of pregnancy.

They must be fed only organic feed and allowed to graze only organically managed pastures.

They are **not** to be given hormones, growth promotants or antibiotics. They are **only allowed** to be given vaccines to prevent illness.

There are requirements and regulations that the animals must be allowed access to outdoors.

In order to place the USDA organic seal on a product label, it must be made with 95% or greater of organic ingredients.

Many American families believe or think natural is the same as organic; it is not.

Organically labeled means:

1. Certified by USDA’s National Organic Program or its agencies.

2. No synthetic fertilizers; sewage sluge or has genetically engineered products raised on the land for 3 or more years.

3. No irradiation applied

4. Livestock; no antibiotics or growth promotants used.

5. NOP does not regulate what happens to meat during processing.

6. NOP refers only to what the animals have eaten.

**Research has indicated that organic foods are not considered healthier for you that traditionally raised foods.**

**Ground Beef**: Ground beef must be from cattle, any other animal meat would be considered illegal or mis-labeled.

It is made from only muscle meat. No organs, only muscle meat that was previously attached to bones. It must be at least 70% lean and no more that 30% fat; however, it is generally leaner than what’s required. It is, also not made from left-overs; trimmings from larger cuts of beef are kept and ground into ground beef. It does not contain added water. Ground beef may not contain any phosphate binders or extenders. *Some processed meat products use non meat fillers, if these are used it can not be labeled as ground beef.* All ground beef is not the same; however, generally the leaner the beef the higher the price. Ground chuck, Ground round, ground sirloin are all ground beef but have different requirements to meet. Ground sirloin and ground round must be no more than 15% fat. Ground chuck must be no more that 20% fat. Special ground meat such as these must be at least 50% from the cut of beef that is indicated. Hamburger is generally defined as ground beef containing 85% lean beef and no more than 15% fat. Ground beef should always be cooked to a temperature of 160F and checked with a meat thermometer; color is not a good indicator of doneness.

References:

1. United States Department of Agriculture-USDA

2. National Organic Program Standards

3. Emily Zweber Zweber Farms

4. Anne Burkholder Feedyard Foodie