

Decoding Meat Labels



The animal was fed organic non-GMO feed (sometimes organic corn and soy). This does not mean that the animal was raised on pasture or treated humanely. This also does not always ensure that the meat is much healthier. Since many organic-fed animals are still fed corn and soy (cheap feed that is not natural to animals and tends to make them sick), their omega-6 fat content is usually as high as non-organic meats (resulting in inflammation). The benefit to organic is that the meat doesn't contain GMOs.

This means that the animal was not fed any genetically modified feed (such as GMO corn or soy). GMOs have been shown to cause health problems especially digestive and gut issues. However, it's important to note that even if meat is organic or non-GMO, the animal still may have been fed organic or non-GMO corn and/or soy which raises the omega-6 fat content which contributes to inflammation.

Free-Range/ Cage-Free

Unfortunately the free-range label doesn't mean much when it comes to poultry or beef. For meats bearing the free-range label, the USDA only requires that the animals are not caged and have access to the outside. However, many large-scale farms take advantage of this weak regulation and pack hundreds or thousands of birds in a large shed with only one tiny opening at one end of the shed. Most of the birds are not aware of the opening, cannot physically access the opening or the opening only leads to a very small fenced outdoor section that wouldn't allow enough space for even a few birds. Most free-range birds do not see outdoors more than a handful of times in their lives. The Free-range label alone does not affect the feed that the animals get. They are likely fed GMO corn and soy unless marked as organic.

100% Grass Fed

**Healthiest option for beef, lamb, goat, bison*

100% grass-fed means that the animal was raised on pasture for its entire life and only ate grass or hay. This is the best option when it comes to beef, lamb, goat, bison, etc. — animals that naturally graze on grass. Most of the time you don't need to worry about an organic label when it comes to animals that are 100% grass fed. Many small farmers can't afford the cost of organic certification, since it is required to be able to prove that the animal feed is organic, but it is difficult to certify wild grass as organic. It is not often necessary to have an organic label with 100% grass fed animals. However, some unsavory companies use GMO alfalfa and consider that "grass", so it is possible in rare cases for 100% grass fed to contain a small amount of GMOs, but it is not likely when buying from a local farmer.

Pasture Raised

**Healthiest option for poultry and eggs— especially when combined with Organic Label*

When considering poultry and eggs, this is a good option. This means that the animal spent at least some of its life on pasture. Pasture raised and organic is usually a good option. This label is not very regulated, so try to contact the farmer to find out if the animal was given supplemental feed and if the feed is organic or if it contains GMOs, corn or soy.

Grass-Fed

Grass fed means that the animal was raised on pasture for a period of time, but not for its entire life. This can mean that the animal was *grain-finished*, meaning that for the last 6 months of its life it was fed grain (likely corn and soy).

Although grass-fed is a much better option than conventional meat, it isn't as good as 100% grass-fed, because the last 6 months of grain feeding will unfortunately undo much of the benefits of the grass feeding and bring the inflammatory omega-6 content up.

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No Hormones/No Antibiotics

This ensures that the animal was not given growth hormones or antibiotics. Although it's best to avoid meat without hormones or antibiotics, this label alone does not affect the feed that the animal was given nor does it affect whether or not the animal was raised humanely or on pasture.



There are different labels for certified humane, each with their own set of standards. "Certified Humane Raised & Handled" means that Animals have access to clean and sufficient food and water, are able to perform natural behaviors, and have enough room to move around freely. Cages, crates, tethers, growth hormones, non-therapeutic use of antibiotics, restrictive farrowing crates for sows, and forced molting in birds through starvation are all prohibited. However, Debeaking (birds) and tail-docking (pigs) is allowed. Outdoor access and natural daylight are not required for all species. This label ensures very minimal assurances for basic needs for animals. It also does not mean that the animal was allowed to roam free on pasture and does not affect what the animal was fed or whether it is organic.

Conventional

When meat is described as conventionally raised this means that the animal was likely in inhumane conditions, possibly given antibiotics and hormones and fed GMO corn and soy. This is the least healthy option when it comes to meat.

Wild

**Healthiest option for fish and seafood.*

Wild means that the fish or animal was caught or hunted from the wild. This usually means that the animal was free to roam (or swim) and eat what it naturally eats, which enables it to be a healthier food than conventionally farmed animals. It's almost impossible to ensure that a wild animal ate solely organic feed, so it is not usually necessary to choose organic over wild.

Farmed (Fish)

With fish or seafood, sometimes you will see the label "farmed". This means that the fish was raised in an aquatic farm. Although you can buy organic farmed fish, wild is a much better option than organic in this case. Farmed fish often has lower beneficial anti-inflammatory omega-3 content, and higher inflammatory omega-6 content. The fish is less healthy since they are often packed together in small pools which breeds bacteria and disease. You can see the lower quality in farmed salmon since it is usually a discolored pale pink (almost white) as opposed to the rich deep pink of wild salmon. Most companies inject dye into farmed salmon to give it the natural pink color that is natural to the fish.

Natural

Unfortunately, the term "natural" on food labels is one of the most misrepresented labels that companies use to mislead consumers. There are little to no regulations on using the word "natural", so meat or any foods with GMOs, non-organic ingredients or high fructose corn syrup can be labeled as natural. Don't count on any food that is labelled as natural without looking into it first.