



'Natural' often means little on label

Is it my imagination, or are there more "natural" products on grocery store shelves these days?

No, it's not your imagination. But even more than other claims on food labels, "natural" should give you pause. In most cases, it has little meaning.

But back to your question. According to the Mintel Global New Products Database, which monitors the appearance of new household products, a whopping one-third of all new U.S. food and beverage products in 2008 highlighted claims of being "natural" or "all natural," or something similar, including "organic," "no additives or preservatives" and "whole grain."

While dietitians encourage consumers to look for "whole grain" on labels to boost nutrition (according to national recommendations, half the grains we eat should be whole), the other terms have little to do with nutrition. For example, foods labeled "organic" must follow guidelines of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program, but that has everything to do with how plants are grown and how animals are raised, and nothing to do with the nutritive value of the final product. Similarly, the term "no additives or preservatives" doesn't affect the nutrition of the product — it just means there are no synthetic additives or preservatives. Those foods can still be loaded with saturated fat, trans fat, sodium, sugar or other ingredients you want to limit in your diet.

The same can be said for the term "natural." The USDA, which regulates

meat and poultry, says those products can be labeled "natural" if they don't contain any artificial ingredients or added color, and are only minimally processed. But if "natural" is used on the label, it must also give an additional explanation, such as "no added colorings or artificial ingredients."

But the Food and Drug Administration allows the term "natural" to be used on a food label if it's "truthful," "not misleading," and when the food contains no added colors, artificial flavors or synthetic substances. Still, there's a lot of gray area. In 2005, the FDA declined a request to more specifically define what is meant by "natural" when it comes to foods.

Soon after, the Center for Science in the Public Interest sued Kraft Foods because of an "all natural" claim on Capri Sun drinks (the lawsuit was dropped when Kraft agreed to take the claim off the label). The group also threatened to sue the makers of 7 Up for making the same claim, but the makers removed the term from the label rather than going to court over it.

What's a consumer to do? Experts recommend to always look beyond what's on the front label, and check the ingredients list. Decide for yourself if the items listed there seem "natural" to you. But don't be lured by the pleasant sounding word "natural" alone. After all, arsenic is natural, but you sure wouldn't want to eat it.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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