

Food Label Words That Sound Healthy...But Are They?

Food labels can be designed to make you think the product is healthy. Surveys have shown that the majority of Americans say they think these labels are helpful in making healthy food choices. Some claims are defined by the Food and Drug Administration, but manufacturers are always coming up with new ones that aren't regulated, even if you happen to know what those definitions are. Here are a few that can be misleading:

Natural

What it sounds like it means: It's not processed.

What it really means: It *might* not contain added colors, artificial flavors or synthetic substances. The FDA hasn't been able to agree on a definition for "natural" labels.

What you should do: See how long the ingredients list is. The fewer the ingredients, the less processed the food generally is.

Lightly Sweetened

What it sounds like it means: It has very little sugar.

What it really means: It could still have lots of sugar or artificial sweeteners. The FDA does not regulate this label.

What you should do: Look for any ingredients that end in "ose". Those are sugars and sweeteners. Check out this list of 54 names for sugar.

Low, Light, and Reduced

What it sounds like it means: It is low calorie or has fewer

grams of fat or sodium.

What it really means: It just means the product has less of those things than the original version. The FDA says that foods can be labeled “light” if they contain half the fat or one-third the calories of the original version. Manufacturers are allowed to say products are “reduced sodium” if they have 25 % less than the original or other similar foods. When companies remove fat and salt from foods, they often replace it with sugar and additives to make it taste good.

What you should do: Before you buy, compare the “low,” “light,” or “reduced” nutritional label with that of the original to see how they compare.

Free

What it sounds like it means: It doesn't contain any of the mentioned ingredients.

What it really means: In the world of food labeling, “free” means not that much. Specifically, 5 calories, 0.5 grams of fat, 5 milligrams of sodium, or 0.5 grams of sugar per serving, according to the FDA.

What you should do: Check your serving size. It may be much smaller than what a person would normally eat. A side-by-side comparison of the original and the free version will tell you a lot.

High in Fiber

What it sounds like it means: It has a lot of natural fiber.

What it really means: For a food to be labeled high in fiber, it must provide 5 grams of fiber or more per serving. However, the fiber doesn't have to be natural. They can basically add a fiber supplement.

What you should do: Look for whole grains on the label. If these are one of the first three sources, chances are the fiber's natural.

Lisa Lewis, author of Healthy Happy Cooking, available in the First Place 4 Health online store.