

Grocery Store Label Decoder Card

What food labels actually mean vs. what they imply

LABEL CLAIM	WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS	TRUSTWORTHY?
USDA Organic	95%+ organic ingredients, no synthetic pesticides, no GMOs, third-party verified	Yes — legally regulated and audited
"Natural"	Almost nothing. No artificial colors/flavors in meat only. No standard for other foods.	No — meaningless marketing term
Non-GMO Project Verified	Third-party tested to be below 0.9% GMO threshold	Yes — independently verified
"Made with Organic"	Only 70% organic ingredients required; rest can be conventional	Partially — check ingredient list
Free Range	Poultry had "access to outdoors" — could be a small door to a concrete pad	Weak — look for Pasture-Raised instead
Cage Free	Not in cages, but can be packed in a barn with no outdoor access	Weak — better than caged, far from ideal
Pasture-Raised	108+ sq ft per bird outdoors. Meaningful outdoor access.	Yes — especially with Certified Humane seal
Grass-Fed	Animal ate grass at some point. May have been grain-finished.	Partial — look for "Grass-Fed AND Grass-Finished"
"No Added Sugar"	No sugar added during processing, but may contain concentrated fruit juice (still sugar)	Check the label — may still be high sugar
"Whole Grain"	Contains some whole grain, but could be mostly refined. Check if first ingredient says "whole."	Check ingredient order — marketing trick
"Sugar Free"	< 0.5g sugar per serving, but often contains artificial sweeteners	Read ingredients — artificial sweeteners may be worse
rBGH/rBST Free	No synthetic growth hormones in dairy cattle	Yes — worth choosing

Red Flag Ingredients (Avoid These)

- High fructose corn syrup — Metabolized differently than sugar; linked to fatty liver

- Artificial food dyes (Red 40, Yellow 5, Yellow 6, Blue 1) – Linked to behavioral issues in sensitive children
- Sodium benzoate – Forms benzene (carcinogen) when combined with vitamin C
- BHA / BHT – Preservatives classified as possible carcinogens
- Carrageenan – Triggers gut inflammation in sensitive individuals
- "Natural flavors" (alone, with no specifics) – Can contain MSG, solvents, or hundreds of unnamed chemicals
- Partially hydrogenated oils (trans fats) – Banned but still appear in small amounts via labeling loopholes
- Sodium nitrite/nitrate (in processed meats) – Forms nitrosamines during cooking; linked to colorectal cancer

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