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What do the labels on your food really mean?

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Summary of Findings:

- Mandatory food labels are regulated by the US Food & Drug Administration
- Voluntary food labels are regulated by the US Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA FSIS) or other organizations
- Food labels can be confusing
- Advocates for voluntary food labels believe consumers have a right to know what is in their food
- Opponents of voluntary food labels believe they create misperceptions about food that is not labeled
- It is imperative to maintain consumer trust in the food industry

Background

Food labels in the United States are mandated by the Food & Drug Administration. They require five items to be on the package: identity, manufacturer name and address, net weight, nutrition facts, and ingredient lists. In addition to these mandatory labels, manufacturers may add voluntary labels indicating how the product was made. These include non-GMO, natural, Certified Humane, free range, no hormones, and no antibiotics, among others. There is no single agency that provides oversight of voluntary food labels in the US. Some labels are regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA FSIS), while others are regulated by nonprofit organizations. With the addition of voluntary labels, choosing food at the grocery store can be confusing. Consumers care about what they eat, and it is important that they understand what these labels mean.

Food labels defined

Label	Meaning	Clarifications	Organization or Agency
Non-GMO	Food produced without GMOs	GMO stands for "genetically modified organism"	Non-GMO Project
Certified Humane	Meets Humane Farm Animal Care Program standards	Animals are "fed a nutritious diet without antibiotics, animals raised with shelter, resting areas, sufficient space and the ability to engage in natural behaviors" (Humane Farm Animal Care, 2018)	Humane Farm Animal Care
Natural	Contains no artificial ingredients, added color, or preservatives and is minimally processed	Minimally processed means the food is not fundamentally altered	USDA FSIS
Free Range	Animals allowed outside access	This only applies to poultry	USDA FSIS
No Hormones	Animals raised without hormones. Can be used on beef. Cannot be used on pork or poultry because hormones are not allowed in raising them.	Naturally occurring hormones will be present	USDA FSIS
No Antibiotics	Animals raised without antibiotics	This only refers to how the animal was raised. No antibiotics are found in food regardless of whether or not the animal received antibiotics.	USDA FSIS

Should these labels be on our food?

Food labeling influences consumer preferences, as well as farming and food production practices. For example, rBST is a synthetic version of a naturally occurring growth hormone in cattle. The phrase, “rBST free” is on certain brands of milk. This leads many consumers to believe that milk without a “rBST free” label has rBST and is therefore unsafe. When consumers stop buying milk that is not labeled as “rBST free,” milk co-ops stop buying milk from farms that use rBST. This costs farmers time and money as they make up for that lost milk production. Whether these labels should be on our food is a continuous debate. However, maintaining consumer trust in the food industry is imperative.

Advocates for voluntary labeling believe in transparency about how food is produced and what is in it. They value having the option to choose what is best for them and their families. Opponents of labeling believe additional labels can create public misperception of food safety. In other words, they fear that consumers would perceive foods without these labels as unsafe or unhealthy.

Possible options

Food labels could remain as they are or be made mandatory. However, the confusion and misperceptions about unlabeled foods would not disappear if consumers still do not know what the labels mean. Therefore, the regulatory agencies should be clear about what each label means, impose strict verification measures, and make this information publicly accessible and understandable. Public education about farming practices and food safety may also prevent some of these misperceptions. Vague food labels may not provide value to either the consumer or the food producers. Transparency could improve if agencies uniformly apply the labels and consumers understand what they meant.

References

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