



Understanding Food Labels Part III: Label Claims

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Food Labels Can Be Confusing...

And Label Claims are often the worst offenders! The Code of Federal Regulations lists specific conditions that must be met in order to make any claims, and in many cases, provides the exact wording that should be used. The FDA divides label claims into three general categories:

Nutrient Content Claims

These statements relate to the make-up of a product, including terms such as “low,” “good source of,” “healthy,” and “antioxidant.” The specific requirements vary (see table for examples). This regulation also limits the use of “health symbols” such as hearts on a label to products that qualify for a “healthy” claim.

Health Claims

These claims link a specific food to a health-related condition or disease, and are supported by a large body of scientific research. As of 2011, there are 11 approved Health Claims that can be made. For a full list, visit www.fda.gov and search “**Appendix C: Health Claims.**”

Qualified Health Claims

These claims are similar to Health Claims, but the scientific evidence is not as strong. These claims can only be made with a disclaimer. To see a current list, visit www.fda.gov and search “**Appendix D: Qualified Health Claims.**”

Over the last couple of decades, more and more symbols, claims, and buzzwords began showing up on the front of food labels. Concerned that this would be even more confusing to consumers, the FDA launched the Front of Packaging Initiative early in 2010. The increased scrutiny resulted in Warning Letters being sent to 17 food companies whose claims violated FDA regulations. Several of the warnings were sent because of statements made on the company’s website – which is considered an extension of the food label!

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulates both print and broadcast advertisements. Claims were often made in commercials that could not be made on the product label. But that is changing. The FTC is working with the FDA to ensure advertising is consistent with labeling rules. So far, the main focus has been on dietary supplements, but foods are also being watched more closely.

DID YOU KNOW?

Title 21, section 101.14 of the Code of Federal Regulations states:

No...health claim may be made...for a food...unless...the food contains 10% or more of the RDI for vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, calcium, protein or fiber...prior to any nutrient addition.

In other words, if a food doesn’t have any real nutritional value on its own, you can’t just add a bunch of vitamins and call it healthy. This is often referred to as “THE JELLY BEAN RULE.”

This table summarizes some common words you might see in claims made on food labels, and what the requirements are for using those terms.

Label Claim	What It Means
“Free,” “Zero,” “Without,” or “No” used with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calories - less than 5 calories per serving • Total Fat - less than 0.5 g total fat per serving • Saturated Fat - less than 0.5 g saturated <i>and</i> trans fat per serving • Cholesterol - less than 2 mg cholesterol per serving • Sodium - less than 5 mg sodium per serving • Sugar - less than 0.5 g per serving
“Low,” “Small Amount of,” “Little,” or “Few” used with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calories - less than 40 calories per serving • Total Fat - less than 3 g total fat per serving <i>and</i> 30% of calories from total fat • Saturated Fat - less than 1 g saturated fat per serving <i>and</i> 15% of calories from saturated fat • Cholesterol - less than 20 mg cholesterol per serving • Sodium - less than 140 mg sodium per serving (less than 35 mg for “Very Low”)
“Reduced,” “Less,” or “Lower” used with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calories - 25% fewer calories than the full calorie version • Total Fat - 25% less fat than the full fat version • Saturated Fat - 25% less saturated fat than the full fat version • Cholesterol - 25% less cholesterol than the full fat version • Sodium - 25% less sodium than the full sodium version • Sugar - 25% less than the full sugar version
“Light” or “Lite”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If more than half of the calories are from fat, there must be 50% less fat than the original version • If less than half of the calories are from fat, there must be 50% less fat <i>or</i> 33% fewer calories than the original version
“High,” “Rich In,” or “Excellent Source of”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must contain at least 20% of the RDI per serving. Can be used for any nutrient.
“Good Source of,” “Contains,” or “Provides”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must contain 10 - 19% of the RDI per serving. Can be used for any nutrient.
“More, Fortified,” “Enriched,” “Added,” “Extra,” or “Plus”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must contain at least 10% of the RDI per serving. Can only be used for vitamins, minerals, protein, fiber, and potassium.
“Healthy,” a heart symbol, or any related term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must meet the requirements for “low fat” and “low saturated fat”; and • Must contain less than 600 mg sodium per serving; and • Must contain less than 90 mg cholesterol per serving; and • Must contain at least 10% of the RDI per serving for two or more of the following: vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, iron, protein, fiber

References:

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. 2010. *Code of Federal Regulations*. Title 21. Subchapter B - Food for Human Consumption.

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