

Additional Information about Food Labels

The following information on food label regulations is from the Food and Drug Administration (May 1999).

<http://www.fda.gov/opacom/backgrounders/foodlabel/newlabel.html>

Nutrient Content Claims

The regulations also spell out what terms may be used to describe the level of a nutrient in a food and how they can be used. These are the core terms:

- **Free.** This term means that a product contains no amount of, or only trivial or "physiologically inconsequential" amounts of, one or more of these components: fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, sugars, and calories. For example, "calorie-free" means fewer than 5 calories per serving, and "sugar-free" and "fat-free" both mean less than 0.5 g per serving. Synonyms for "free" include "without," "no" and "zero." A synonym for fat-free milk is "skim".
- **Low.** This term can be used on foods that can be eaten frequently without exceeding dietary guidelines for one or more of these components: fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, and calories. Thus, descriptors are defined as follows:
 - **low-fat:** 3 g or less per serving
 - **low-saturated fat:** 1 g or less per serving
 - **low-sodium:** 140 mg or less per serving
 - **very low sodium:** 35 mg or less per serving
 - **low-cholesterol:** 20 mg or less and 2 g or less of saturated fat per serving
 - **low-calorie:** 40 calories or less per serving.

Synonyms for low include "little," "few," "low source of," and "contains a small amount of."

- **Lean and extra lean.** These terms can be used to describe the fat content of meat, poultry, seafood, and game meats.
 - **lean:** less than 10 g fat, 4.5 g or less saturated fat, and less than 95 mg cholesterol per serving and per 100 g.
 - **extra lean:** less than 5 g fat, less than 2 g saturated fat, and less than 95 mg cholesterol per serving and per 100 g.
- **High.** This term can be used if the food contains 20 percent or more of the Daily Value for a particular nutrient in a serving.
- **Good source.** This term means that one serving of a food contains 10 to 19 percent of the Daily Value for a particular nutrient.
- **Reduced.** This term means that a nutritionally altered product contains at least 25 percent less of a nutrient or of calories than the regular, or reference, product. However, a reduced claim can't be made on a product if its reference food already meets the requirement for a "low" claim.
- **Less.** This term means that a food, whether altered or not, contains 25 percent less of a nutrient or of calories than the reference food. For example, pretzels that have 25 percent less fat than potato chips could carry a "less" claim. "Fewer" is an acceptable synonym.

- **Light.** This descriptor can mean two things:
 - First, that a nutritionally altered product contains one-third fewer calories or half the fat of the reference food. If the food derives 50 percent or more of its calories from fat, the reduction must be 50 percent of the fat.
 - Second, that the sodium content of a low-calorie, low-fat food has been reduced by 50 percent. In addition, "light in sodium" may be used on food in which the sodium content has been reduced by at least 50 percent.

The term "light" still can be used to describe such properties as texture and color, as long as the label explains the intent--for example, "light brown sugar" and "light and fluffy."

- **More.** This term means that a serving of food, whether altered or not, contains a nutrient that is at least 10 percent of the Daily Value more than the reference food. The 10 percent of Daily Value also applies to "fortified," "enriched" and "added" "extra and plus" claims, but in those cases, the food must be altered.

Alternative spelling of these descriptive terms and their synonyms is allowed--for example, "hi" and "lo"--as long as the alternatives are not misleading.

Healthy. A "healthy" food must be low in fat and saturated fat and contain limited amounts of cholesterol and sodium. In addition, if it's a single-item food, it must provide at least 10 percent of one or more of vitamins A or C, iron, calcium, protein, or fiber. Exempt from this "10-percent" rule are certain raw, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables and certain cereal-grain products. These foods can be labeled "healthy," if they do not contain ingredients that change the nutritional profile, and, in the case of enriched grain products, conform to standards of identity, which call for certain required ingredients. If it's a meal-type product, such as frozen entrees and multi-course frozen dinners, it must provide 10 percent of two or three of these vitamins or minerals or of protein or fiber, in addition to meeting the other criteria. The sodium content cannot exceed 360 mg per serving for individual foods and 480 mg per serving for meal-type products.

Other Definitions

The regulations also address other claims. Among them:

- **Percent fat free:** A product bearing this claim must be a low-fat or a fat-free product. In addition, the claim must accurately reflect the amount of fat present in 100 g of the food. Thus, if a food contains 2.5 g fat per 50 g, the claim must be "95 percent fat free."
- **Implied:** These types of claims are prohibited when they wrongfully imply that a food contains or does not contain a meaningful level of a nutrient. For example, a product claiming to be made with an ingredient known to be a source of fiber (such as "made with oat bran") is not allowed unless the product contains enough of that ingredient (for example, oat bran) to meet the definition for "good source" of fiber. As another example, a claim that a product contains "no tropical oils" is allowed--but only on foods that are "low" in saturated fat because consumers have come to equate tropical oils with high saturated fat.
- **Meals and main dishes:** Claims that a meal or main dish is "free" of a nutrient, such as sodium or cholesterol, must meet the same requirements as those for individual foods.

Other claims can be used under special circumstances. For example, "low-calorie" means the meal or main dish contains 120 calories or less per 100 g. "Low-sodium" means the food has 140 mg or less per 100 g. "Low-cholesterol" means the food contains 20 mg cholesterol or less per 100 g and no more than 2 g saturated fat. "Light" means the meal or main dish is low-fat or low-calorie.

- **Standardized foods:** Any nutrient content claim, such as "reduced fat," "low calorie," and "light," may be used in conjunction with a standardized term if the new product has been specifically formulated to meet FDA's criteria for that claim, if the product is not nutritionally inferior to the traditional standardized food, and the new product complies with certain compositional requirements set by FDA. A new product bearing a claim also must have performance characteristics similar to the referenced traditional standardized food. If the product doesn't, and the differences materially limit the product's use, its label must state the differences (for example, not recommended for baking) to inform consumers.

"Whole grain"

Includes cereal grains that consist of the intact, ground, cracked or flaked fruit of the grains whose principal components -- the starchy endosperm, germ and bran -- are present in the same relative proportions as they exist in the intact grain. Such grains may include barley, buckwheat, bulgur, corn, millet, rice, rye, oats, sorghum, wheat and wild rice. Although rolled and "quick oats" can be called "whole grains" because they contain all of their bran, germ and endosperm, other widely used food products may not meet the "whole grain" definition. Consumers should look to see that grains such as wheat, rice, oats or corn are referred to as "whole" in the list of ingredients.

Currently, manufacturers can also make factual statements about whole grains on food labels such as "10 grams of whole grains" or "1/2 ounce of whole grains."

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/flragui.html>

'Fresh'

Although not mandated by NLEA, FDA has issued a regulation for the term "fresh." The agency took this step because of concern over the term's possible misuse on some food labels.

The regulation defines the term "fresh" when it is used to suggest that a food is raw or unprocessed. In this context, "fresh" can be used only on a food that is raw, has never been frozen or heated, and contains no preservatives. (Irradiation at low levels is allowed.) "Fresh frozen," "frozen fresh," and "freshly frozen" can be used for foods that are quickly frozen while still fresh. Blanching (brief scalding before freezing to prevent nutrient breakdown) is allowed.

Other uses of the term "fresh," such as in "fresh milk" or "freshly baked bread," are not affected.