

Food Products Nutrition Claims

What nutrition claims on product packaging really mean

Have you ever stood in the grocery store aisle, torn between two products, trying to decide which is the better choice? You read the product labels, and try to weigh the benefits of all the health claims plastered all over the packages these days. "Low-fat," "Lite," "Heart Healthy" – what exactly do all of these claims mean?

Thanks to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), there actually is a method to the madness surrounding the nutrition and health claims printed on product packages. Government regulations specifically spell out what terms and phrases may be used in what instances to define nutrient levels in food.

To follow are the FDA's guidelines for various nutritional terms. Now you'll know exactly what it means – and exactly what you're getting – when you see phrases like "low-sodium," "lean," and "extra lean" on the foods you're buying.

Nutrient Content Claims

"FREE"

This means that a product contains no amount of, or only inconsequential amounts of, whatever precedes the term, like fat, saturated fat, sodium, sugars, cholesterol, etc. The product says: The product has: Calorie-free Fewer than 5 calories per serving Sugar-free Less than 0.5g of sugar per serving Fat-free Less than 0.5g of fat per serving Sugar-free Less than 0.5g of sugar per serving

Synonyms often used in place of "free" include: "without," "no" and "zero."

"LOW"

This term may be used on foods that can be consumed frequently without exceeding recommended dietary guidelines for things like fat, saturated fat, sodium, cholesterol and calories. The product says: The product has:

Low-fat 3g or less per serving Low in saturated fat 1g or less per serving

Low-sodium 140mg or less per serving Low-cholesterol 20mg or less, AND 2g or less of saturated fat Low-calorie (or low-cal) 40 calories or less per serving

Synonyms often used instead of "low" include: "few," "low source of," "little," and "contains a small amount of."

"LESS"

This term means that a food contains at least 25% less of a nutrient (like fat, sodium, etc.) or 25% less calories than the regular, referenced product. A synonym often used instead of "less" is "fewer."

"REDUCED"

This term means that a product contains at least 25% less of a nutrient (like fat, sodium, etc.) or 25% less calories than the regular, referenced product.

However, manufacturers cannot use a "reduced" claim when the product they're referencing (comparing to) already meets the requirement for a "low" claim.

"LIGHT"

This term can be used to mean either of two things:

1. That a nutritionally altered product contains 33% fewer calories, or half the fat of, whatever food they're referencing. (If the food derives half or more of its calories from fat, to claim "light," the fat must be reduced by

at least 50%), OR

2. That the sodium content of a low-calorie, low-fat food has been reduced by 50%. "Light in sodium" may be used on non-"low-calorie" or non-"low-fat" foods if the sodium has been reduced by at least 50%.

"LEAN" and "EXTRA LEAN"

These terms describes a low fat content in poultry, meat, and seafood.

The product says: The product has: Lean Less than 10g fat, AND 4.5g or less saturated fat, AND less than 95mg cholesterol per serving and per 100g. Extra lean Less than 5g fat, AND less than 2g saturated fat, AND less than 95mg cholesterol per serving and per 100g

"PERCENT FAT-FREE"

Any product bearing this claim must be a low-fat or a fat-free product, and the percent amount claimed must be based on the amount of fat present in 100g of the food. (For example, if a food contains 5g of fat per 100 grams, then the claim "95% fat-free" would be acceptable.)

"MORE"

This term means that a serving of food contains a nutrient (like calcium, vitamin C, etc.) that is at least 10% of the Daily Value more than the food they're referencing. Specifically for foods that have been nutritionally altered, the same 10% rule applies, and those foods often carry synonyms for "more" such as "fortified," "enriched," and "added." In order for a product package to claim, "Good source of calcium," it must contain at least 100 mg of calcium per serving.

"GOOD SOURCE"

This term means that one serving of the food contains 10-19% of the Daily Value for a particular nutrient (like calcium, vitamin C, etc.).

"HIGH"

This term may be used if the food contains 20% or more of the Daily Value for a particular nutrient (like calcium, vitamin C, etc.) in a serving.

"FRESH"

This term can be used to suggest that a food is raw or unprocessed. "Fresh" can be used only on a food that is raw, has never been frozen or heated, and contains no preservatives. "Fresh frozen," "freshly frozen," and "frozen fresh" may be used for foods that are quickly frozen while still fresh.

"HEALTHY"

This term can be used only on foods that are low in fat and saturated fat, and that contain limited amounts of cholesterol and sodium. Additionally, if it's a single-item food, it must provide at least 10% of one or more of vitamins A or C, iron, calcium, protein, or fiber. (Exemptions to this rule include certain raw, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables and some cereal-grain products which may be labeled "healthy" if they do not contain ingredients that change the nutritional profile.) Also, on individual foods, to be labeled "healthy," the sodium content cannot exceed 360mg per serving.