

Misleading Claims

Tips and tricks for the grocery store Written by: Mateja Savoie Roskos and Amy Spielmaker

Watch out for misleading claims. Always look at the nutrition facts label and the ingredients list. Package labeling can be very deceptive. Below are a few of the misleading claims found on food labels.

1 All natural

Foods labeled “all natural” cannot contain added colors, artificial flavors, or synthetic substances. However, a food labeled “all natural” may contain preservatives, high fructose corn syrup, or be injected with sodium.

2 No sugar added

Keep in mind that no sugar added foods likely still contain sugar. Most foods, including fruits, vegetables, milk, and grains, naturally contain sugar. While it is good that no additional sugar has been added, it is important to remember that “no sugar added” does not mean the product has no sugar.

3 Sugar free

Sugar free does not mean a product has fewer calories than its full-sugar counterpart. It may, in fact, have more. Sugar-free products often contain more fat to compensate for the taste and texture that is lost when the sugar content is reduced.

4 Zero trans fat

Products that claim zero trans fat can actually contain up to .5 grams per serving. If you eat more than one serving, this small amount can add up. Check for words on the ingredient list such as hydrogenated oil, partially hydrogenated oil, and shortening, which indicate that trans fat is still present.

5 Fat free

Just like “sugar free” claims, “fat free” claims do not mean that the product is low calorie. These products likely contain extra sugar to compensate for the reduced fat content.

6 Light

Although “light” may make you think that the food is lower calorie, it can actually refer to the flavor rather than the nutritional content. For example, light olive oil means the flavor is mild, not that the calorie content is any lower than regular olive oil.

7 Gluten free

Gluten is a protein found in grains that can be harmful to people with gluten allergies or celiac disease. The increasing availability of gluten-free foods is great for people who have problems digesting gluten, but the labeling may be a little confusing. Gluten free does not mean the product is whole grain, contains more fiber, or has fewer carbohydrates. Gluten-free products are for people who need them. They will not help you lose weight and they are not necessarily good for you.

8 Made with real fruit

Products that claim to be made from real fruit may not contain very much fruit at all, or none of the type pictured on the box. Food manufacturers do not need to list the percentage of fruit, so a product claiming “made with real fruit” can contain 100% fruit or 1% fruit.

9 Lightly sweetened

Although the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has definitions for reduced sugar, no added sugar, and sugar free, “lightly sweetened” has no regulations associated with it. Therefore, you cannot be sure how much sugar the product actually contains by looking at the packaging; you must read the nutrition facts label.

10 Per serving

Food companies can be tricky with serving sizes. To make a product look low in fat or calories, they may list information based on a small, unrealistic serving size. Remember to look at the serving size and make an educated decision based on how much you typically consume.

11 Catchy claims

Food labels often make claims about the benefits of their brand, like “cholesterol free” and “fat free” that can be misleading on certain products. For example, a brand of vegetable oil claiming to be “cholesterol free” may seem healthier than the other vegetable oil brands, but since vegetable oil is a plant product, it does not naturally contain cholesterol, so all the vegetable oil brands are cholesterol free. Likewise, fruit juice brands claiming to be “fat free” are not healthier because fruit juice is naturally fat free. Be wary of claims like these on food labels, and make sure to do a “common sense” check before making your selection.