

Getting a grasp on meat labels

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Spend any amount of time in a grocery store and you'll see foods labeled in separate categories. Organic, all-natural, naturally raised, grass-fed and grain-fed labels supply shelves and meat counters.

While each one of these categories has its own market, confusion can occur on what defines qualifications for the label.

Organic

Organically labeled meat means that the animal's diet can consist of any grain or forage product as long as those feed items are certified organic. This program is the most strict with the most guidelines, and is governed by the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP).

For a meat product to qualify as certified organic, livestock must live an antibiotic and hormone-free life (all food naturally contains hormones, this refers to administered). In addition, feed resources are also regulated.

To be certified organic, a grain or forage resource must not have had synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation applied, and/or had genetically engineered products produced on that ground in three or more years.

Something that has potential to confuse consumers is that organic only certifies the livestock's feed resources, not the finished product. This means that colorant products can be added to the meat during processing.

There is no research confirming organic foods are healthier than conventionally raised foods. Because of lack of preservative use, organically grown products have the possibility of increased contamination of bacteria, parasite and pathogens.

However, people who may have food allergies, chemical allergies, or intolerance to preservatives may prefer organic food products.

All-natural

Meat, poultry, and eggs that carry the "natural" label cannot be altered during processing; this would include the addition of artificial ingredients (spices, marinades, sauces, etc.), the addition of colorants, the additional of chemical preservatives, making the meat minimally processed.

Contrary to organic, livestock qualifying as all-natural do not have dietary restrictions and can be administered growth hormones and antibiotics.

It is a common myth these animals cannot receive growth hormones or antibiotics. Each individual producer can decide if their animals can/need to receive growth hormones and/or antibiotics and still be labeled "All-natural".

Naturally raised and NHTC (non-hormone treated cattle)

"This should not be confused or used interchangeably with all-natural – they are not the same thing.

Unlike all-natural, naturally raised beef must be raised without growth hormones and antibiotics and must be certified by USDA's Agricultural Market Service.

The meat product is also minimally processed and does not contain artificial ingredients or colorants.