

Generational Trends for Food Shopping and Obtaining Nutrition Information

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Several recent national surveys on food shopping and food trends have been released. I was struck by the interesting dichotomy between the generations on food purchases. Here is summary of the research, including whether these shopping decisions are research-based, governed by regulations, or based on other influences.

In the U.S., all food and food labeling, except for meat, poultry and eggs, are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. Meat, poultry and eggs are regulated by the USDA and often individual state departments of agriculture.

Results of the 2019 U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends research report by the Hartman Group for the Food Marketing Institute of 1,786 U.S. primary shoppers aged 18 or older showed that baby boomers and older generations are more likely to shop for food labeled: low sugar, low sodium, low fat, high fiber and low carbohydrate. These terms indicate the shoppers are interested in how healthy the food is.

For these label terms, the FDA has established regulations for qualified health and nutrient claim definitions that manufacturers can print on food labels based on research. Consumers can use these claims and the Nutrition Facts label to compare foods and choose the most healthful. However, these particular terms can be confusing. Many do have FDA definitions, so are regulated. However, food manufacturers may choose to use them or often use alternate, unregulated terms to help sell their products. Here is the legal use of the above terms:

- Low sugar. There is no allowed FDA “low sugar” term, so it may not be used. A reduced or less-sugar term may be used if the food has 25% less sugar per the reference amount customarily consumed (RACC) or an appropriate reference (similar) food. Look for and compare the new Nutrition Facts labels that include “added sugars.” The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend consuming no more than 10% of calories, or 200 grams (12.5 teaspoons) of added sugars per 2,000 calories per day.
- Low sodium is defined by FDA as 140 milligrams or less per RACC per 50-gram portion or per 100 grams of main dish/meal.
- Low fat is defined by FDA as 3 grams or less per RACC per 50-gram portion or 3 grams per 100 grams of main dish/meal, and not more than 30% of calories from fat.

- High fiber. The term “high” in general may be used if the food product contains 20% or more of the daily value (refers to amount needed of a nutrient per day based on a 2,000 calorie diet reference) per RACC. If the food is not low in total fat, then the label must disclose the level of total fat per serving.
- Low carbohydrate. There is no allowed FDA “low carbohydrate” term, so it may not be used. Compare two similar foods and similar portion sizes that you will consume, and the amount of fiber and total carbohydrate. Realize that fiber is a part of the total carbohydrate amount. Fiber is a positive component of carbohydrates of which most Americans do not consume enough. Look for higher fiber foods to consume more often, such as whole grains, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables, and beans.

According to the research, millennials and Gen Z shoppers most often look for food packaging claims of: natural, gluten-free, free-range and certified humane. These terms are not specific to the implied healthfulness of the food, but rather the perceived quality, content or lack of an ingredient, or humaneness of producing the food. Here’s what these terms really mean for food labelling:

- Natural. The FDA asked for comments on using the term “natural” on food labeling and the comment period closed in 2016. To date, the FDA has not made a rule to “establish a formal definition for the term ‘natural,’” but we do have a longstanding policy concerning the use of “natural” in human food labeling. The FDA has considered the term “natural” to mean that nothing artificial or synthetic (including all color additives regardless of source) has been included in, or has been added to, a food that would not normally be expected to be in that food. However, this policy was not intended to address food-production methods, such as the use of pesticides, nor did it explicitly address food processing or manufacturing methods, such as thermal technologies, pasteurization or irradiation. The FDA also did not consider whether the term “natural” should describe any nutritional or other health benefit. Therefore, without a clear rule, manufacturers can freely label foods “natural” without any meaningful, enforceable definition.
- Gluten-free. The gluten-free rule was issued by the FDA in 2013 and went into effect in August 2104. It states: “The rule specifies, among other criteria, that any foods that carry the label “gluten-free,” “no gluten,” “free of gluten,” or “without gluten” must contain less than 20 parts per million (ppm) of gluten. This level is the lowest that can be reliably detected in foods using scientifically validated analytical methods.” In 2017, the FDA audited 702 food samples with the claim, and only one did not comply and was recalled. This is good news for the estimated 3 million, or one in 103 Americans, who cannot consume wheat, barley, rye or their derivatives due to celiac disease or gluten insensitivity. Choosing to eat gluten-free for any other reason (without an established diagnosis and counseling from a registered dietitian) can be unhealthy, as many nutrients such as fiber, some B vitamins and minerals, are not always enriched or fortified in gluten-free foods. They are also very expensive.
- Free range or free roaming. For meat or poultry to be labeled, the USDA rules state: “Producers must demonstrate to the Agency that the poultry has been allowed access to the outside.” This does not imply quality from the ruling; it is considered labeled for humane reasons.
- Certified humane. According to the USDA, the term “certified” implies that the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service and the Agriculture Marketing Service have officially evaluated a meat product for class, grade or other quality characteristics (for example, “certified Angus beef”). When used under other circumstances, the term must be closely associated with the name of the organization responsible for the “certification” process, for example: “XYZ Company’s certified beef.” Thus, only the term “certified” is regulated, not “certified humane.”

Many people are also interested in organic labeling. “Certified organic” does have a legal definition by the USDA. For more information on what the organic label means, check our Penn State Extension

Creating Health article “Organic Foods,” found online at <https://extension.psu.edu/organic-foods>.

Sources of Nutrition Misinformation

Aside from food product label information, where and who consumers obtain their nutrition misinformation from is enlightening. Younger adults, in particular, trust more technology-based sources, such as fitness apps, bloggers and people on TV.

Unfortunately, Facebook, blogs/vlogs, Instagram, and TV/radio still lead with the most nutrition misinformation. Celebrities account for 87% of nutrition misinformation, followed by friends and family (84%), people with similar personal experiences (73%), nurses, chiropractors, physical therapists/occupational therapists and pharmacists (54%) and medical doctors (36%).

Finding accurate, reliable nutrition information can be tricky. Look for accurate food labeling terms, as described here, and compare Nutrition Facts labeling between similar foods. For more ways to identify accurate nutrition information and reliable sources of information, check the Penn State Extension Creating Health article, “Nutrition Fact or Fiction” found online at <https://extension.psu.edu/nutrition-fact-or-fiction>.

Registered dietitian nutritionists are the qualified health professionals to contact if you have particular questions on diet and disease, or have individual questions on nutrition and your health-care needs.