

# Food Labels: Nutrient Content Claims

The Food and Drug Administration has regulations that 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

**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.

## HEALTH CLAIMS

Claims for 10 relationships between a nutrient or a food and the risk of a disease or health-related condition are now allowed. They can be made in several ways: through third-party references (such as the National Cancer Institute), statements, symbols (such as a heart), and vignettes or descriptions. Whatever the case, the claim must meet the requirements for authorized health claims--for example, they cannot state the degree of risk reduction and can only use "may" or "might" in discussing the nutrient or food-disease relationship. And they must state that other factors play a role in that disease.

The claims also must be phrased so consumers can understand the relationship between the nutrient and the disease and the nutrient's importance in relationship to a daily diet. An example of an appropriate claim is: "While many factors affect heart disease, diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of this disease." The allowed nutrient-disease relationship claims and rules for their use are:

**Calcium and osteoporosis:** To carry this claim, a food must contain 20 percent or more of the Daily Value for calcium (200 mg) per serving, have a calcium content that equals or exceeds the food's content of phosphorus, and contain a form of calcium that can be readily absorbed and used by the body. The claim must name the target group most in need of adequate calcium intakes (that is, teens and young adult white and Asian women) and state the need for exercise and a healthy diet. A product that contains 40 percent or more of the Daily Value for calcium must state on the label that a total dietary intake greater than 200 percent of the Daily Value for calcium (that is, 2,000 mg or more) has no further known benefit.

**Fat and cancer:** To carry this claim, a food must meet the nutrient content claim requirements for "low-fat" or, if fish and game meats, for "extra lean."

**Saturated fat and cholesterol and coronary heart disease (CHD):** This claim may be used if the food meets the definitions for the nutrient content claim "low saturated fat," "low-cholesterol," and "low-fat," or, if fish and game meats, for "extra lean." It may mention the link between reduced risk of CHD and lower saturated fat and cholesterol intakes to lower blood cholesterol levels.

**Fiber-containing grain products, fruits and vegetables and cancer:** To carry this claim, a food must be or must contain a grain product, fruit or vegetable and meet the nutrient content claim requirements for "low-fat," and, without fortification, be a "good source" of dietary fiber.

**Fruits, vegetables and grain products that contain fiber and risk of CHD:** To carry this claim, a food must be or must contain fruits, vegetables and grain products. It also must meet the nutrient content claim requirements for "low saturated fat," "low-cholesterol," and "low-fat" and contain, without fortification, at least 0.6 g soluble fiber per serving.

**Sodium and hypertension (high blood pressure):** To carry this claim, a food must meet the nutrient content claim requirements for "low-sodium."

**Fruits and vegetables and cancer:** This claim may be made for fruits and vegetables that meet the nutrient content claim requirements for "low-fat" and that, without fortification, for "good source" of at least one of the following: dietary fiber or vitamins A or C. This claim relates diets low in fat and rich in fruits and vegetables (and thus vitamins A and C and dietary fiber) to reduced cancer risk. FDA authorized this claim in place of an antioxidant vitamin and cancer claim.

**Folic acid and neural tube defects:** Folic acid and neural tube defects: This claim is allowed on dietary supplements that contain sufficient folate and on conventional foods that are naturally good sources of folate, as long as they do not provide more than 100 percent of the Daily Value for vitamin A as retinol or preformed vitamin A or vitamin D. A sample claim is "healthful diets with adequate folate may reduce a woman's risk of having a child with a brain or spinal cord defect."

**Dietary sugar alcohols and dental caries (cavities):** This claim applies to food products, such as candy or gum, containing the sugar alcohols xylitol, sorbitol, mannitol, maltitol, isomalt, lactitol, hydrogenated starch hydrolysates, hydrogenated glucose syrups, or a combination of any of these. If the food also contains a fermentable carbohydrate, such as sugar, the food cannot lower the pH of plaque in the mouth below 5.7. Besides the food ingredient's relationship to dental caries, the claim also must state that frequent between-meal consumption of foods high in sugars and starches promotes tooth decay. A shortened claim is allowed on food packages with less than 15 square inches of labeling surface area.

**Soluble fiber from certain foods, such as whole oats and psyllium seed husk, and heart disease:** This claim must state that the fiber also needs to be part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and the food must provide sufficient soluble fiber. The amount of soluble fiber in a serving of the food must be listed on the Nutrition Facts panel.