

# Is “Certified Organic” Really Healthier?

Just how far does a “Free Range” chicken roam? Shoppers are faced with an onslaught of food labels in the grocery store. What's better for you - cage-free or non-GMO. What does that actually mean, anyway?



Let's break it down:

## **Label: Organic and Certified Organic**

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), organic is a term that indicates that a food or product has been made while protecting natural resources, conserving biodiversity, and using only approved substances. Synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, irradiation, and genetic engineering may not be used.

Studies have shown that [consuming organic products](#) may [reduce your exposure to synthetic chemicals](#). However, organic products still may contain [biopesticides](#), which are “usually inherently less toxic than conventional pesticides,” according to the EPA. Whether you decide to buy organic or conventional produce, I recommend

soaking all fruits and vegetables in a one percent baking soda/water solution for 12-15 minutes before you eat. This can wash off up to 96 percent of pesticides, according to a study published by the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry.

### **Label: Cage-free and Free-range**

Cage-free and free-range eggs must be produced by hens housed in a way that allows them unlimited access to food and water and the freedom to roam during the laying cycle, according to the USDA. Unlike conventional and cage-free hens, free-range hens also have continuous access to the outdoors.

Besides the apparently more humane conditions that the chickens are raised in, free-range farming may offer an efficient alternative to fortifying eggs with [vitamin D](#). The vitamin D3 content of egg yolks was three to four times higher in the group of hens exposed to sunlight, compared to the indoor group, according to a study published by the German Institute of Agricultural and Nutritional Sciences in 2014. If buying free-range eggs is not an option, conventional eggs, fish, shellfish, and vitamin D-fortified products are good sources to include in your diet.

### **Label: Non-GMO**

Non-GMO products do not contain genetically altered organisms or ingredients. The label also indicates that animals were not fed genetically engineered feeds.

The long term effects associated with eating genetically modified foods is still up for debate. Most of the research on GMOs has been conducted either by biotechnology companies that support GMO use or by activist groups against GMOs. More unbiased [epidemiological](#) studies are needed to determine the safety of GMOs.

### **Label: All Natural/Natural**

The “natural” label indicates that a product contains no artificial ingredients or

added color and is only minimally processed.

Keep in mind that “natural” does not always mean better or healthier. Some products state “all natural ingredients” because they use raw cane sugar versus refined sugar; however, it is still sugar. “Natural” is a broad term that can include: fruits, vegetables, animal products or sub-products, and even insects. For example, the food coloring carminic acid or Natural Red 4 is extracted from dried cochineal bugs. Some vanilla and raspberry flavors are extracted from glandular secretions of beavers and are still considered natural ingredients by the USDA.

### **Label: No Hormones**

The phrase “no hormones added” may be used on beef labels if sufficient documentation shows no hormones have been used in raising the animals, according to the USDA. Hormones are not allowed in raising hogs and poultry. In fact, the claim “no hormones added” cannot be used on pork or poultry unless it is followed by a statement that says “Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones.”

The FDA allows the use of steroid hormones and their synthetic versions in order to increase the growth rate in animals. These drugs are approved after they have been proven safe for animals, consumers, and the environment. To better understand the health and environmental risks posed by growth promoters of animals raised for human consumption, we need more research.

### **Label: No Antibiotics Added**

Antibiotics are widely used in livestock to treat infections and promote growth and reproduction. The term “no antibiotics added” may be used on the food labels of red meat and poultry if enough documentation is provided, as stated by the USDA.

The USDA runs the National Residue Program for Meat, Poultry, and Egg Products

to guarantee that the amount of antibiotics used by manufacturers is minimal and causes no direct harm to consumers. Nonetheless, the risk of creating drug-resistant strains of bacteria due to prolonged exposure to antibiotics is worrisome. Studies show that the long-term use of antibiotics, in both humans and animals, can cause bacteria such as E. Coli and Salmonella to become resistant to antibiotics. Humans could become ill from E. coli bacteria and Salmonella poisoning. You can potentially reduce your exposure to these bacteria by following food safety practices. To avoid antibiotics, buy certified organic and hormone-free products when possible.

### **Label: Gluten-free**

The gluten-free label is a voluntary claim that manufacturers may choose to use on a food label, and is regulated by the FDA. According to the FDA, any food claiming to be gluten-free must contain less than 20 parts per million of gluten and must not contain any type of wheat, rye, barley, or crossbreeds of these grains.

Gluten is a protein found in baked goods, salad dressings, canned soups, and even deli meats. This protein can affect the lining of the small intestine for those with celiac disease. Additionally, some individuals may have non-celiac gluten sensitivity or a gluten allergy. This can result in uncomfortable gastrointestinal symptoms and skin rashes when gluten is eaten. Following a gluten-free diet can help relieve these symptoms. To avoid complications and potential nutrient deficiencies, I recommend visiting your doctor and a dietitian to obtain an official diagnosis and appropriate medical nutrition therapy before making major changes to your diet.



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