

Deciphering label claims on food products

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Label claims on food products can provide a wealth of information about the foods we eat but can sometimes be daunting to understand.

Phrases such as "great source of" or "reduced calorie" can often be interpreted as vague by the consumer when, in reality, food companies must ensure their products meet a specific standard before being allowed to use such phrases.

Being aware of what these claims mean can enhance your shopping experience and allow you to more appropriately choose foods based on your health needs.

The University of Alabama's Sheena Quizon Gregg has provided some of the most common food label claims used by food producers and explained what this means to you as a consumer:

Calories

- Low calorie – 40 calories or less per serving
- Reduced calorie – at least 25 percent fewer calories per serving when compared to a similar food
- Light or Lite – 1/3 fewer calories or 50 percent less fat per serving
- Calorie free – less than 5 calories per serving (If more than half the calories are from fat, the [fat content](#) must be reduced by 50 percent)

Fat

- Fat free – less than 1/2 gram of fat per serving
- Low fat – 3 grams of fat or less per serving
- Reduced fat – at least 25 percent less fat when compared to a similar food

Cholesterol

- Cholesterol free – less than 2 milligrams of cholesterol per serving AND 2 grams or less of saturated fat per serving
- Low cholesterol – 20 milligrams or less of cholesterol per serving AND 2 grams or less saturated [fat](#) per serving

Sodium

- Sodium free – less than 5 milligrams of sodium per serving
- Very low sodium – 35 milligrams or less sodium per serving
- Low sodium – 75 percent less sodium than the amount in non-reduced sodium item (140 milligrams or less of [sodium](#) per serving)
- Unsalted – food prepared without salt that normally is salted during processing

Other claims that you may see on a label often times may include:

- High fiber – 5 or more grams of fiber per serving
- "High in..." – provides 20 percent or more of the Daily Value of a specified nutrient per serving (e.g. Calcium)
- "Good source of..." – provides at least 10 to 19 percent of the Daily Value of a particular vitamin or nutrient per serving

Consumers should keep in mind that many of the above referenced claims are based on an individual serving of that particular food. Serving sizes and servings per container can be found on the back of all food products with a nutrition facts label.

Another helpful thing to keep in mind when reviewing a food product label is the ingredients list. Ingredients for [food products](#) are listed in descending order by weight; thus, any ingredient listed first on a food label makes up the largest weight of that particular food product.

Though many chronic conditions warrant a specialized diet, being familiar with a food product's label claims and nutrition facts can help make dietary changes easier. The Food and Drug Administration also recently announced a proposal to update the nutrition facts label for packaged foods to better reflect how much consumers are really eating in one serving versus how much one should be eating.

A revamped food label would also better emphasize calories in a [food](#) product, as well as sugars added to a product. To learn more about the recently proposed changes, please visit the U.S. Food and Drug Administration website.

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Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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