What exactly does 'healthy' mean when it comes to food?

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Anyone who's ever walked into a grocery store has seen the various health claims on food items calling certain products "healthy." But what exactly does "healthy" mean—and can you rely on it?

The Food and Drug Administration is trying to find out. The federal agency [recently began a public process](#) to redefine how the word "healthy" can be used on [food products](#). It's an issue that would change how companies can label foods and how consumers perceive them.

To help unravel the meaning of the term "healthy," UCLA Health writer Ryan Hatoum spoke with Dana Hunnes, senior dietitian at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center and adjunct assistant professor at UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health, to get an expert's take.

What would you consider a healthy food?

I would consider healthy foods ones that are as close to nature as possible. That would mean foods that aren't highly processed or adulterated.

Generally speaking, foods with fewer ingredients as well as ingredients that are recognizable are healthy. A list of ingredients that are easily recognizable as a food, such as walnuts and artichokes, can indicate a healthy food. Manufactured ingredients—with unrecognizable names like methyl paraben, maltodextrin, artificial color yellow 5 and the like—can indicate a food isn't so healthy.

Single-ingredient foods, like green beans, edamame and avocado, are clearly healthy, but a frozen dinner made up of quinoa, bell peppers and tofu can be healthy too—as long as it doesn't have too many additives.

I'd also say a food can be considered healthy if it isn't associated with the development of chronic illness. Trans fats found in processed foods, added sugars, sodium and saturated fats found in animal proteins are some of the biggest contributors to heart disease, diabetes, stroke and cancers. We also know that red meats are possible carcinogens, and processed meats are definite carcinogens, as defined by the World

Health Organization.

How do you think words like "healthy" should be used on food packaging?

The term "healthy" should be used in a way that points the consumer to those food products that are, more or less, unadulterated and unprocessed and contain ingredients they can identify. A long list of unrecognizable ingredients should be cause for concern.

For example, I think it would be perfectly acceptable to call popcorn kernels a "healthy" food item, but not microwavable popcorn with trans fats and salt added. You could call trail mix that contains a mixture of dried fruits and nuts a [healthy food](#), but not trail mix that is primarily chocolate with a smattering of nuts in it.

I don't think foods with added sugar, [trans fats](#), saturated fats, white flour or low fiber should have "healthy" written on the packaging.

How do we get to an acceptable definition of the term "healthy food"?

We should look at the supporting research. We need to look at the science behind which nutrients and foods help prevent the chronic diseases I mentioned earlier.

Our team of dietitians often jokes that the only constants among healthy diets are fruits and vegetables. We're finding that the diets linked to the lowest risk for those chronic diseases are primarily plant-based diets, which are full of whole grains, nuts, seeds, legumes and occasional, small doses of lean animal proteins.

How can consumers make informed decisions about the health claims on packaged foods?

One reason why packaged foods can be challenging is because of the FDA labeling laws that allow food and supplement manufacturers to make claims about the structure and function of a particular ingredient.

For example, a company can designate on packaging that a cereal containing calcium is "good for you" and thus promotes bone health even if that cereal is laden with added sugars. Claims about particular ingredients can be misleading in understanding the nutritional value of the entire food.

Our first order of business should be to create a rubric of what will be accepted as "healthy." Then we can set about revising current food-labeling regulations. At the end of the day, the clearer food labels are, the likelier consumers are to make healthier choices.

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