

Less salt, more whole grains: FDA updates food label definition of 'healthy'

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Salmon can't be labeled a "healthy" food under existing federal

regulations, because it contains high levels of fat.

But sweetened cereals can bear the "healthy" label on their packaging if they tick specific boxes related to individual nutrients—even though they might be loaded with added sugars.

These contradictions fly in the face of modern nutrition science and common sense, so the U.S. Food and Drug Administration [announced](#) on Wednesday that it is updating the marketing term "healthy" to reflect what has been learned about what makes a wholesome diet.

The new proposed FDA [rule](#) would align the definition of the "healthy" claim more closely with current nutrition science.

"Nutrition is key to improving our nation's health," Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a statement. "Healthy [food](#) can lower our risk for chronic disease. But too many people may not know what constitutes [healthy food](#). [The] FDA's move will help educate more Americans to improve [health outcomes](#), tackle health disparities and save lives."

More than 80% of Americans aren't eating enough vegetables, fruits and dairy, but they are consuming unhealthy amounts of added sugars, saturated fats and sodium, the agency said.

The FDA first defined "healthy" back in 1994, but based the criteria for the term's use solely on individual nutrients contained in each particular food product, the agency's new proposal states.

Nutrition science has evolved since then. These days, nutritionists focus on a person's overall dietary pattern, emphasizing the consumption of nutrient-dense foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

The types of nutrients also matter. Salmon is indeed fatty, but now those fats are thought to be good for you—for example, mono- and [polyunsaturated fats](#), as well as healthy [omega-3 fatty acids](#) that promote heart and brain health.

Under the new rule, more foods that are part of a healthy dietary pattern and recommended by the U.S. federal [nutrition](#) guidelines would be eligible to call themselves "healthy," the FDA said.

These include nuts and seeds, high-fat fish like salmon, and certain cooking oils.

To be able to bear the word "healthy" on their packaging, products would have to contain meaningful amounts of food from one of the recommended food groups—fruits, vegetables, dairy, grains and lean protein.

They'd also have to limit nutrients that aren't good for you, including [saturated fat](#), sodium and added sugars.

For example, each serving of a cereal sold as "healthy" would have to contain three-quarters of an ounce of whole grains, and no more than 1 gram of saturated fat, 230 milligrams of sodium and 2.5 grams of added sugars, the agency said.

The FDA said the new definition is intended to both empower consumers to eat better and, potentially, foster a healthier food supply by prompting manufacturers to add more good foods like vegetables or whole grains to their [product lines](#).

The agency also is researching a symbol that manufacturers could slap on the front of packaging to show their product meets the new "healthy" definition.

More information: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has more on the [Nutrition Facts label](#) and the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#).

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