

Food safety expert explains food labels and their regulations

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Understanding what terms such as "natural," "organic" and "local" on food labels really mean is important before purchasing any food product, according to Kansas State University food safety specialist Londa Nwadike.

Consumers may not realize there is currently no broadly regulated definition for "natural" products, Nwadike said.

"For meat products, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has a specific definition for what constitutes a natural product, which pertains to the processing method. But for all other products, the Food and Drug Administration does not have a regulated definition for the term 'natural' right now," said Nwadike, state extension consumer [food safety](#) specialist for Kansas State University and the University of Missouri.

She says while the FDA will investigate inaccurate claims on a food label when [consumers](#) raise objections, it is still up to consumers to check the ingredient list and use their best judgment before purchasing products.

Another term lacking a regulated definition is "local." Nwadike says certain grocery stores and other entities may have their own definitions, but there is no uniformly enforced national definition for the term.

"Organic" does have a regulated and certified definition. Products with the certified USDA organic seal have been inspected by the agency for their organic practices, whether in growing or processing, and those practices have been verified as "organic," Nwadike said.

"A lot of people might still sell things as organic or organically grown, but it might not be certified organic, which means no third party has verified the practices as organic," she said.

Nwadike points out these products may still be using organic practices, but the producers choose not to pay for the certification.

Currently, there is no conclusive scientific evidence that certified organic foods or those labeled as "natural" or "local" are safer—or less safe—from foodborne pathogens, Nwadike said. Therefore, consumers should base their buying decisions on personal preference for a particular production method and other factors. Consumers also need to follow good food safety handling practices, including washing hands, keeping foods at proper temperatures and preventing cross-contamination.

Nwadike encourages consumers to ask questions—whether of the producer manager at the grocery store or the vendor at the farmers market—about how their [food](#) is produced.

"If shoppers are interested in particular practices, especially if they're shopping at a farmers market, that's a great chance to ask farmers directly how they grow their product," Nwadike said. "Whether it's composting, how they test their water source, if they use pesticides, or any other specific topic of interest, you can ask those questions directly."

Provided by Kansas State University

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