

# Why ‘Healthy’ Food Labels Fool Even Savvy Shoppers



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May 14, 2025 — Even health-conscious WebMD readers can be fooled at the grocery store.

Sure, you read the [Nutrition Facts](#) and compare products. But your brain is also absorbing cues from the food packaging, and those cues influence your choices more than you think.

We are all “cognitive misers,” said marketing expert Dipayan Biswas, PhD, a professor at the University of South Florida Muma College of Business. “We only use our brain as much as we have to. It’s too much work to process and figure out if something is healthy or unhealthy.”

So when you see that picture of fruits and vegetables on the package, your brain automatically associates the food with being healthy, even if you don’t realize it.

## The ‘Neuromarketing’ Tactics at Work

Of course, you probably expect food marketing tricks — but what you may not realize is how much effort goes into them or how easily even savvy shoppers can be influenced.

Food purchased for eating at home is a trillion-dollar industry. With so much money at stake, companies deeply research how to sell food to us. “They may be wiser than academics who study marketing,” said Christina Roberto, PhD, director of the Psychology of Eating and Consumer Health (PEACH) lab at the University of Pennsylvania. “They put the resources in to figure out how to make things appealing.”



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### Reading Food Labels

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What are the key parts of a food label?

yogurt packaging. Do we linger on granola-bar claims about sweeteners, antioxidants, and genetic modification? That’s been studied, too. (Years ago, Frito-Lay used an electroencephalogram, or EEG, to discover that customers [actually enjoy the messiness](#) of orange Cheetos dust. It led to an award-winning ad campaign.)

The food industry pays for some nutrition research, and what do you know: When funding comes from a food company, results often look better. One [analysis](#) examined all the original research published in top nutrition and dietetics journals in 2018. Of the studies with some kind of industry funding, more than half benefited the funder. But less than 10% of articles *without* corporate money were favorable to industry interests.

### Luring You With Buzzwords

Manufacturers know the appeal of buzzwords like “natural.” It’s unregulated and has no specific meaning, but your brain doesn’t care. Even if you know this, a subtle message gets through.

“If you see a potato chip with the claim ‘all natural,’ you think that potato chip has fewer calories than the same bag of potato chips without that claim — even though ‘natural’ doesn't say anything about calories,” said Anna Grummon, PhD, director of Stanford University’s Food Policy Lab. “It's not that it says low calories or low fat. It just says all natural.”

In studies without food industry funding, Grummon examined how claims like “healthy,” “high fiber,” and “low fat” influence consumer behavior.

“We tend to buy more of those products,” even when compared with products that don’t have the labels but are nutritionally identical, she said. “In experiments, if we manipulate whether the product has the claim or not, people like the product more when it does. They think it's healthier and are more likely to buy it.”

Boasting about specific nutrients — think “high protein” or “low-sodium” — is another way companies can mislead while still being honest. That one nutrient doesn’t necessarily mean a product is good for you. Same goes for labels that tout the lack of a nutrient, like gluten.

### Don't Be Fooled by Food Labels



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If it's labeled "natural," it's healthier.

“That’s an issue that doesn’t affect over 90% of people, but people see gluten-free and think, ‘It’s healthy for me,’” Biswas said. “Those buzzwords get us, and those words change over time.”

Companies spend millions of dollars to figure out which buzzwords suit the dietary zeitgeist.

“Companies are happy to tout the healthy aspects of their product, to say, ‘This is high in fiber, low in saturated fat,’” Grummon said. “They don't want to disclose less healthy aspects of their product. Maybe their breakfast cereal is low in saturated fat but quite high in sugar.”

If a food manufacturer can convince you to buy an item using a health claim, they may win twice over. “People indulge more if they

☐ False

something unhealthy, you're [also] eating more of it."

## Tricking Parents About Kids'

### Food

Packaging on kids' foods often uses pictures and words that suggest the contents are good for growing children — when in reality, the products are often full of added sugars and ultra-processed ingredients.

Consider “toddler milk,” a kind of powdered drink that supposedly benefits toddlers’ development. In 2022, Americans purchased [\\$1.7 billion](#) worth of the stuff. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) says these products are no better than cow’s milk.

“They’ve essentially created an entire category of food called toddler milks, and they’re marketing them as if toddlers need specialized drinks,” Roberto said. “But these are sugary drinks toddlers shouldn’t be consuming.”

Then there are toddler-specific, ultra-processed snacks, like Gerber’s [Organic Lil' Crunchies White Cheddar Broccoli](#). The label features multiple nutrition-oriented phrases like “made with real veggies,” “baked snack,” “made with beans,” and “2 g of plant protein per serving.” Other positive messages include “baby-led friendly,” “non-GMO ingredients,” and a USDA organic seal. It’s enough to make you think this highly processed food is better for your toddler than actual broccoli.

Fruit drinks, which usually contain some kind of added sweetener, are another minefield of misleading statements. One [study](#), in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, analyzed labeling on fruit drinks bought by parents of young children. Of the 2,000-plus drinks included in the sample, 97% included at least one nutrition-related health claim on the front, like “natural flavors” or “good source of vitamin C.”

“From a nutrition point of view, we don't need these drinks,” Grummon said. “They're basically sugar water, and they're often marketed with claims that we have shown in research can deceive people.”

### What’s Allowed and What Isn’t

The front of food packages is less monitored than you might think. Only three kinds of claims are [regulated by the FDA](#), and two offer substantial wiggle room:

- **Health claims** that link specific foods or nutrients to health conditions are closely regulated. Only seven have been approved for labels. These include the link between calcium and vitamin D and reduced risk of osteoporosis; dietary fat and decreased cancer risk; and fiber-containing fruits, vegetables, and grain products and the lower risk of certain cancers. Other approved claims include fiber’s role in reducing coronary heart disease risk, the potential of fruits and vegetables to lower cancer risk, the link between saturated fat and cholesterol and coronary heart disease, and the connection between sodium intake and high blood pressure. All seven have loads of scientific evidence behind them.

Skip to main content **nt claims** can use words like “free,” [“high” or “low,”](#) “more,” “good source of,” and “reduced” to describe a particular nutrient, according to detailed guidelines. This can be misleading, though. For instance, “cholesterol free” sounds good but has no

- **Structure and function claims** give food manufacturers the most leeway. They describe how a nutrient in the food supports your health, like “calcium builds strong bones.” But there’s much less oversight here — the FDA doesn’t require companies to provide proof or even notify them about the claims being made.

For more than a decade, some food manufacturers have voluntarily used a front-of-package label designed by industry trade groups, called [Facts Up Front](#). Consumer advocacy groups say it muddies the waters because it’s based on the percent Daily Value of a nutrient. That percentage reflects a 2,000-calorie per day diet, but most Americans eat more or less, so the numbers may not apply.

Currently the FDA is working on a design for proposed new [front-of-package nutrition labeling](#). The required label would interpret the sodium, saturated fat, and sugar content, listing each as “low,” “medium,” or “high.” Experts like these interpretive labels because they help consumers understand healthiness at a glance, and they’ve been proven effective in other countries.

“Chile has done this well. They have a very evidence-based label,” Roberto said. “It’s a stop-sign warning that tells consumers when products are high in sodium, saturated fat, added sugar, and calories. I like the symbol they use because it’s leveraging our natural associations with an octagon stop sign.”

She worries about one aspect of the FDA’s proposed plan: listing all three nutrients, which isn’t always applicable — like, for instance, with soda.


“It’s low in saturated fat and sodium but high in added sugar. That’s a very confusing message,” she said. “It’s like pulling up to a traffic light that’s red and green at the same time. Just say high in sugar and leave out the not-relevant saturated fat and sodium.”

## Get Savvy (or Savvier)

With all this conflicting, often deceptive information, what’s a smart consumer to do?

- **Take *all* claims with a grain of salt.** “You should be skeptical of any kind of claim you see on food packaging,” Roberto said. “As much as people say nutrition science is complicated, it’s also true that we generally know what to eat.”
- **Focus on three key nutrients.** Saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar all have voluminous research to show they can harm your health. Keep all three as low as possible.
- **Ignore claims like “made with real fruit” or “fat free.”** Manufacturers often cherry-pick a single thing to trumpet on the front, which masks more negative attributes. “Made with” has no official meaning — the amount could be minuscule, and the claim would technically be true. Products that are fat free often have high levels of added sugar. Flavor has to come from somewhere. “Practically all sugary beverages have zero fat,” Biswas said, “but they all have extremely high calories.”
- **Stick to whole foods.** Fruits and vegetables don’t have claims on them.

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