

Consumer Trends: Majority of Shoppers Look for Natural Label

Consumer Reports

YONKERS, N.Y., June 16, 2014 (PRNewswire) — According to a new national survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center released today, 59 percent of consumers check to see if the products they are buying are "natural," despite there being no federal or third-party verified label for this term. Moreover, while a majority of people think that the "natural" label actually carries specific benefits, an even greater percentage of consumers think it should.

Consumer Reports survey also revealed that more than 8 out of 10 consumers believe that packaged foods carrying the "natural" label should come from food that contains ingredients grown without pesticides (86 percent), do not include artificial ingredients (87 percent), and do not contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs) (85 percent), reinforcing a wide gap between consumer reality and consumer expectations.

Consumer Reports is seeking to close that gap by calling for a ban on the "natural" label on food as part of a [campaign](#) [1] being done in partnership with TakePart, a social action platform.

Consumer Reports' poll also reveals new data on what consumers expect from a wide range of food labels, including "fair trade," "humane," "organic," "raised without antibiotics," and "country of origin."

"Our findings show consumers expect much more from 'natural' food labels and that there is a strong consumer mandate for better food production practices in general and food label standards that meet a higher bar," said Urvashi Rangan, Ph.D., Executive Director, Consumer Reports Food Safety and Sustainability Center. "Due to overwhelming and ongoing consumer confusion around the 'natural' food label, we are launching a new campaign to kill the 'natural' label because our poll underscores that it is misleading, confusing, and deceptive. We truly don't believe there is a way to define it that will meet all of consumers' expectations."

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not developed a formal definition for use of the term "natural" or its derivatives. However, the agency has not objected to the use of the term if "nothing artificial or synthetic (including all color additives regardless of source) has been included in, or has been added to, a food that would not normally be expected to be in the food"—though these are still found extensively in "natural" labeled foods. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which regulates meat and poultry, says that a product is "natural" if it contains "no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed. Minimal processing means that the product was processed in a manner that does not fundamentally alter the product." But the Consumer Reports national survey shows

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that consumers believe the label means and should mean far more than these narrow definitions.

"Let's clean up the green noise in the food label marketplace so Americans can get what they want: truthful labels that represent important and better food production systems," said Rangan. "Our new campaign also promotes credible labels that underscore a more sustainable system and will decode phony labels that cloud the marketplace."

Consumer Reports' poll also shows that a range of environmental, safety, and social concerns are imperative to most U.S. consumers when purchasing food, including supporting local farmers (92 percent), protecting the environment from chemicals (89 percent), reducing exposure to pesticides (87 percent), fair conditions for workers (86 percent), good living conditions for animals (80 percent), and reducing antibiotic use in food (78 percent).

Other key findings from the Consumer Reports National Research Center Survey include:

- **FAIR TRADE.** About 80 percent of consumers will pay more for fruits and vegetables produced by workers under fair wage and working conditions; and about one-third of consumers would even pay 50 cents or more per pound.
- **ANIMAL WELFARE.** The majority of consumers think the humanely raised claim on eggs, dairy and meat should mean that the farm was inspected to verify this claim (92 percent), the animals had adequate living space (90 percent), the animals were slaughtered humanely (88 percent), and the animals went outdoors (79 percent). Currently, the "humanely raised" label does not require that the farm was inspected, and there are no standards for ensuring animals had adequate living space, were able to go outdoors, or were slaughtered humanely.
- **ANTIBIOTIC USE.** While nearly 7 out of 10 Americans (65 percent) correctly think the "raised without antibiotics" means that no antibiotics were used; a sizable portion (31 percent) of consumers mistakenly think this label means no other drugs were used in addition to antibiotics. In addition, if an animal was routinely given antibiotics, the vast majority of consumers (83 percent) demand that the government require that this meat be labeled as "raised with antibiotics."
- **LABELING GMOS.** Nine out of 10 Americans think that before genetically engineered (GE) food is sold, it should be labeled accordingly (92 percent) and meet long-term safety standards set by the government (92 percent). Similarly, nine out of 10 of Americans specifically agree that the government should require that GE salmon be labeled before it is sold (92 percent). In addition, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of consumers say that it is crucial for them to avoid GE ingredients when purchasing food.
- **ORGANIC.** Nine out of 10 consumers demand that the "organic" label on packaged or processed foods should mean no toxic pesticides were used (91percent), no artificial materials were used during processing (91percent),

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no artificial ingredients were used (89 percent), and no GMOs were used (88 percent). The "organic" label is verified and backed by comprehensive federal standards that prohibit GMOs and nearly all toxic pesticides, artificial processing aids and ingredients. While there is room for improvement, the "organic" label already largely meets consumer expectations.

- **COUNTRY OF ORIGIN.** Nine out of 10 Americans want food labels to reflect country or origin (92 percent) and want to know if their meat is from outside the U.S. (90 percent).

Consumer Reports' new public education effort and petition drive to ban the "natural" label is aimed at pressuring the government to stop giving industry permission to label products as "natural." Later this week, Consumer Reports will deliver its official petition to the government, and the campaign will culminate in a day-long conference on labeling at City Hall in San Francisco on Friday, September 19. Over the next several months, Consumer Reports will partner with TakePart in an ongoing series on its site called "Know your food, know your labels" that will look at a wide array of food labeling concerns, ranging from well-defined terms like "organic" to newer terms like "humane" or "fair trade" where some labels are meaningful and some are not, to those labels that are not worth consumers' premium dollars.

Consumer Reports Poll Methodology

The Consumer Reports® National Research Center conducted a nationally representative phone survey to assess consumer opinion regarding the labeling of food. Opinion Research Corporation (ORC) of Princeton, New Jersey administered the survey to a nationally representative sample of 1,004 adult U.S. residents (half of the respondents were women) through its CARAVAN Omnibus Survey. Respondents were selected by means of random-digit dialing and were interviewed via phone. The data were statistically weighted so that respondents in the survey were demographically and geographically representative of the U.S. population. The survey was conducted April 17-21, 2014.

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