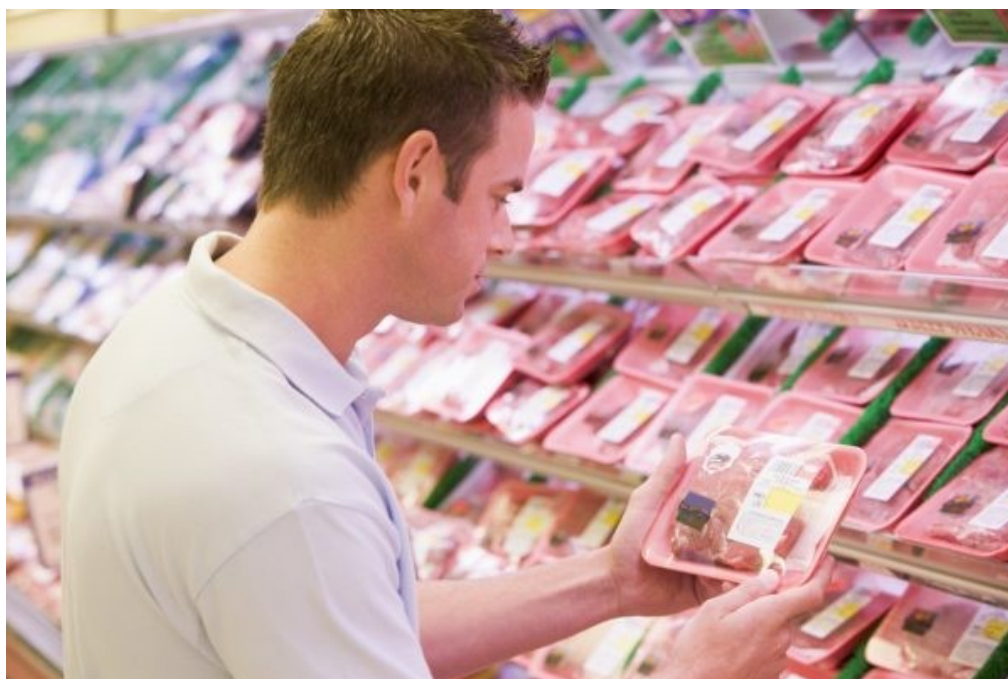


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Safer Shopping: Meats



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This article is the third in a [six-part series](#) focused on helping consumers choose safer products that align with their values.

Our consumer choices have an impact far beyond the register, but with so many competing concerns, how do we shop our values? One recent [consumer study](#) of 2,100 people in 25 cities across the country found that 68.3 percent of Americans want to use their power as consumers to influence corporate practices. More than any other issue, people want to know that the products they buy are “non-toxic.”

Not poisoning our families or the environment seems like a simple choice to make, but [shopping your values](#) is surprisingly complicated.

Marketing vs. Labeling

Product packaging regularly makes claims of “nontoxic,” “all natural,” and “no artificial ingredients” that imply but do not guarantee enhanced product safety.

For products from cleaning supplies to packaged foods, there are no regulations specifically governing the use of terms like “nontoxic,” “toxin-free,” or “all natural” to market products. For reliable assurances that a product is nontoxic, shoppers must familiarize themselves with a variety of [labels associated with third-party certification systems](#).

Meaty Terms

One exception to the marketing free-for-all is meat.

The [USDA defines the terms](#) that can be used on meat and poultry packaging. Reading through the USDA definitions may tell you more than you ever wanted to know about rendering. But it is enlightening, as the list includes the use of “natural” as well.

According to the USDA, meat labeled “natural” must contain no artificial ingredients or added color and be minimally processed. Minimal processing means that processing has not fundamentally altered the product, as it does in the case of deli meats and hot dogs. The label must include a statement explaining the meaning of the term natural (such as “no artificial ingredients; minimally processed”).

The USDA does not allow meats to bear the label “chemical free.”

Hormones and Antibiotics

The routine administration of antibiotics to promote animal growth and prevent infection in industrial farm environments contributes to the public health threat of antibiotic resistance and supports unsustainable farming practices.

The USDA does not allow the use of hormones in raising hogs or poultry. Therefore, the claim “no hormones added” is meaningless on pork and poultry labels.

When searching for meat products raised without antibiotics, [read the wording of the claim](#) carefully. “Antibiotic free” simply means that meat is free of antibiotic residue — which is required for all meat. Other claims only relate to certain uses of antibiotics and may not reflect a meaningful difference from standard industrial farming practices.

Even organic certification allows for some use of antibiotics. Whichever claim the package makes, a USDA Process Verified seal means that USDA inspectors have confirmed it.

Certified Meat

The term “certified” used alone implies that the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service and the Agriculture Marketing Service have officially evaluated a meat product for class, grade, or other quality characteristics (for example “Certified Angus Beef”).

Under other circumstances, the label must include the name of the organization responsible for the “certification” process.

The number of organizations offering certifications is daunting. Each of them has its own [standards](#), with some allowing preventative use of antibiotics and others permitting GMO feed. [The Environmental Working Group](#) has identified the most reliable:

There are variations among these standards as well. These are worth studying if you are concerned about particular safety aspects of the meat industry.

But none of these seven systems allow the use of antibiotics or synthetic growth hormones for healthy animals. And each of them provides strong third-party verification with regular, frequent on-farm inspections.

Shop carefully and you can send a clear message that the meat you do consume is safe, as well as raised in less environmentally damaging ways.

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