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Understanding Food Terms

If you're trying to eat healthier or control your weight, you'll be watching what you eat. That means reading food packages and labels. But with so many different terms, it can be confusing.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has rules that define the terms food companies can use to describe the nutrients your body takes in from that food. Here's what the terms used on food packages are really telling you:

Free

How you might see it on a label: fat-free, sugar-free, calorie-free

What it means: This means that a product does not have any of that nutrient, or so little that it's unlikely to make any difference to your body. For example, "calorie-free" means less than 5 calories per serving. "Sugar-free" and "fat-free" both mean less than 0.5 g (grams) per serving.

These nutrients can be described using the term "free":

- Fat
- Saturated fat
- Cholesterol
- Sodium
- Sugars
- Calories

Other terms that may be used: Without, no, zero and (for fat-free milk) skim.

Note that this only refers to nutrients in food. The word “free” may be used differently for things people may be allergic to or intolerant of, such as lactose and gluten.

Low

How you might see it on a label: low-fat, low-sodium, low-cholesterol, low-calorie

What it means: This term can be used on foods that can be eaten often and you still won't get more than the recommended amount of that nutrient.

The nutrients that can be described with this label are:

- Fat
- Saturated fat
- Cholesterol
- Sodium (salt)
- Calories

Other terms that may be used: Little, few, low source of, and contains a small amount of.

Here are some specific definitions:

- Low-fat: 3 g (grams) or less per serving
- Low-saturated fat: 1 g or less per serving, with not more than 15% of the calories coming from saturated fat
- Low-sodium: 140 mg (milligrams) or less per serving
- Very low sodium: 35 mg or less per serving
- Low-cholesterol: 20 mg or less per serving
- Low-calorie: 40 calories or less per serving

Lean and extra lean

How you might see it on a label: lean beef, extra-lean beef

What it means: These terms can be used to describe how much fat is in meat, poultry, seafood, and game meats.

- **Lean:** less than 10 g (grams) total fat, 4.5 g or less saturated fat, and less than 95

mg (milligrams) cholesterol per serving and per 100 g (about 3¾ ounces by weight, just under a quarter of a pound)

- **Extra lean:** less than 5 g fat, less than 2 g saturated fat, and less than 95 mg cholesterol per serving and per 100 g

High

How you might see it on a label: high calcium, high-fiber

What it means: This term can be used if the food contains 20% or more of the Daily Value of a certain nutrient per serving. Look for this term if you're trying to get more of a certain nutrient.

Other terms that may be used: Rich in, and excellent source of.

Good source

How you might see it on a label: good source of fiber

What it means: This term means that 1 serving of a food contains 10% to 19% of the Daily Value for a certain nutrient.

Other terms that may be used: More, enriched, fortified, extra, plus, or added.

Reduced

How you might see it on a label: reduced fat, reduced calorie, reduced sodium

What it means: This term is used when a food has been altered to take out at least 25% of a certain component – like fat, salt, or calories. Companies may not use the term “reduced” on a product if the original version already meets the requirement for a “low” claim (see above).

Less

How you might see it on a label: less sodium, less fat, 25% less fat than...

What it means: This term means that a food, whether altered or not, contains 25% less

of a nutrient or calories than another food. It could be the “regular” version of the same food, or a different food. For example, pretzels that have 25% less fat than potato chips could carry a “less” claim on their label.

Other terms that may be used: Fewer.

Light or lite

How you might see it on a label: light or lite cream cheese

What it means: This term can mean lower calories, fat, or sodium:

- If less than 50% of the calories in the food are from fat, it can mean that a food has been changed so it contains either one-third fewer calories or no more than half the fat of the regular version of this food.
- If the food gets 50% or more of its calories from fat, then the product must have half the fat of the regular version in order to use “light.”
- The term “light” can also be used when the sodium (salt) content of a low-calorie, low-fat food has been reduced by 50%. “Light in sodium” may also be used on food in which the sodium content has been reduced by at least 50% even if it isn’t low-fat or low-calorie. “Lightly salted” means there’s half as much sodium than is normally added to the food. It may not be low enough to qualify as “low sodium.”

The term “light” still can be used to describe such properties as texture and color, as long as the label explains the intent – for example, “light brown sugar” and “light and fluffy.”

A word about serving sizes

If you’re watching what you eat to control or lose weight, the most important part of the label is the serving size. It can be found in the Nutrition Facts box on the label. Many people think that low-fat or low-calorie means that they can eat a lot of the food without taking in too many calories. Usually that’s not true. If you eat twice as much of the “light” version of a food, you often end up taking in more calories than a standard serving of the regular version. The calorie and nutrient information listed on the label is the amount in one serving only, and the size of the serving is listed, too.

Look at food labels

Make food labels work for you. Use them when you shop or snack, as you plan your meals, and as you cook each day. The label helps you figure out the amounts of nutrients you're getting and compare one product to another. Reading and understanding food labels is a good step toward healthy eating.

If you have any other questions about food labels, diet, or nutrition, call your American Cancer Society.

References

US Food and Drug Administration. Guidance for Industry: Food Labeling Guide. January 2013. Accessed at <https://www.fda.gov/regulatory-information/search-fda-guidance-documents/guidance-industry-food-labeling-guide> on June 1, 2020.

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