

# IN THE KNOW ABOUT NUTRITION

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## *Sorting Food Facts and Myths: Do Foods Labeled as “Natural” Deliver on Your Expectations?*

Have you ever bought one brand of food instead of another because it was described as “natural?” Are you paying more for a food labeled as “natural?” What does “natural” mean to you? The manufacturer may have a different meaning.



### **What Consumers Think “Natural” Means**

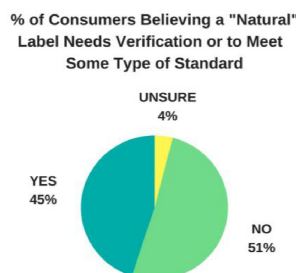
A 2015 Consumer Reports survey of a nationally representative group of 1,005 adults found more than half of consumers usually look for products with a “natural” food label.

Many consumers thought a “natural” label on packaged/processed foods currently meant:

- No toxic pesticides were used (63%)
- No artificial materials or chemicals were used during processing (62%)
- No artificial ingredients or colors were used (61%)
- No GMOs [Genetically Modified Organisms] were used (60%).

An even greater percentage (about 80%) felt these characteristics were what the label SHOULD mean.

Consumers were asked if they believed a “natural” label needed to be verified or meet some type of standard, and they answered Yes, (45%); No (51%); and Unsure (4%).



A 2016 International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation Food & Health Survey (1,003 adults) found “healthfulness” was a top driver in food purchasing decisions. Consumers responding to a choice of definitions about healthy eating styles chose the following top three:

- “the right mix of foods” (51%)
- “limited or no artificial preservatives or ingredients” (41%)
- “natural” (37%)

When asked to describe what “natural” means, there were a range of responses in relation to food. These included: “no additives or preservatives,” made from “natural ingredients” and “straight from nature.”

### **FDA’s Definition of “Natural”**

In response to the uncertainty of the meaning of “natural,” in 2016 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) asked for public comments on such questions as:

- “Whether it is appropriate to define the term ‘natural,’
- If so, how the agency should define ‘natural,’ and
- How the agency should determine appropriate use of the term on food labels.”

They are currently reviewing those comments. At present:

“The FDA has considered the term ‘natural’ to mean that 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 that food. However, this policy was not intended to address food production methods, such as the use of pesticides, nor did it explicitly address food processing or manufacturing methods, such as thermal technologies,

pasteurization, or irradiation. The FDA also did not consider whether the term ‘natural’ should describe any nutritional or other health benefit.”

### USDA’s Definition of “Natural” for Meat



**Have you ever wondered what the word “natural” means on a meat label?**

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service, the term “natural” on a meat or poultry label means:

“A product containing 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. The label must include a statement explaining the meaning of the term natural (such as ‘no artificial ingredients; minimally processed’).”

### The Bottom Line

Unless a standardized definition is developed for ‘natural,’ this term means little more than no artificial ingredient or added color is present in the food. In addition, in the case of meat and poultry, it also should be minimally processed. If you are seeking a specific attribute in a ‘natural’ product, don’t pay extra unless the label provides enough information ensuring you are getting what you are looking for.

### References:

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