

CHICKEN: WHAT DO ALL THOSE LABELS MEAN?



Chicken producers put a lot of information on their claims. But what do all those things mean?

Look at this package of chicken breast. You see the terms or stamps:

- Boneless, skinless
- 99% fat-free
- Fresh
- All natural
- 100% vegetarian diet
- No animal by-products
- Raised cage-free
- No hormones or steroids
- No antibiotics ever
- USDA A Grade
- USDA Process verified
- Hatched, raised, and harvested in the USA
- U.S. Department of Agriculture inspected for wholesomeness



So what information can you gather from all these claims and stamps?

The chicken breast meat included in the package is boneless and skinless. For chickens, most of the fat is deposited under the skin and not between the muscle fibers. So any chicken that has the skin removed is going to be very low in fat. So any skinless chicken can have “99% fat-free” as a claim.

The chicken is ‘fresh’ meaning it has never been frozen.

The package does give you more detail about some of the claims, if you look at the fine print.

The claim ‘All Natural’ has an asterisk (*) next to it. If you look at the bottom of the package, the asterisk says the definition of ‘All Natural’ simply means that it is minimally processed and there are no artificial ingredients. Based on this definition, all chicken sold in the United States can carry this claim.

Many of the other claims have a † next to them. Looking at the footnotes we see that means the statements have been verified by USDA. Going to the website listed you can see that the company is listed as having had these production parameters verified, but the site does not



tell you what they mean and why you should, or should not care. So we will go through them one by one.

‘100% Vegetarian diet’ and ‘no animal by-products’ basically mean the same thing. Chickens are normally fed a corn-soybean meal based diet. Sometimes by-products from the slaughter of pigs or chickens are rendered into a safe feedstuff that can be added to animal feeds as a good quality protein source. By saying the diet is ‘all vegetarian’ and has ‘no animal by-products,’ they are indicating that the company has not made use of the valuable feed resource. Why does matter?

Chickens are omnivores. That means they eat both animal and plant materials. The rendered by-products are a safe and nutritious feedstuff for chickens. Some people, however, prefer that such materials not be included in the chickens’ diet for fear of ‘Mad Cow Disease.’ The prions that cause this disease, however, are not found in these animal by-products.

Next, it says the chicken was raised ‘cage-free.’ One would presume, therefore, that someone must be raising meat chickens in cages, but this is NOT the case. In the United States, no meat chickens are raised in cages. It is also important to note that cage-free does not mean that the chickens go outside of the barn. It just means that the chickens are not kept in cages. **So every package of chicken can be labeled ‘cage-free.’**

Then it says that the chicken has ‘no hormones or steroids.’ Every animal (including humans) naturally has hormones and steroids. A hormone is defined as ‘a chemical substance produced in the body that controls and regulates the activity of certain cells or organs.’ A steroid is defined as “any of a large group of fat-soluble organic compounds,... most of which have specific physiological action.’



The use of this claim started decades ago to distinguish chicken from beef which have used hormone implants to speed up the growth of the cattle. Poultry producers have NEVER used hormones or steroids. Aside from being illegal, it is impractical and not necessary.

That ‘no hormone or steroid’ claim has two asterisks (**) beside it. If you look down at the footnotes you find that it states that ‘Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones or steroids in poultry.’ **So every package of chicken can be labeled ‘No added hormones or steroids.’**

The question then is, why would you even want to use hormones or steroids? Meat chickens have been selected for fast growth and feed efficiency. They do not need any hormones or steroids to speed up their grow rates. Implanting each chicken would be impractical and adding them to the feed would not work. If hormones or steroids were added to the feed, they would be broken down in the digestive tract and the chickens would not actually receive the hormones or steroids fed.

So it is important to remember that:

NO CHICKENS ARE EVER GIVEN HORMONES OR STEROIDS

What about the 'No Antibiotics Ever' claim. The meaning is obvious, the poultry producers never gave the chickens any antibiotics. By why would they?

An antibiotic is defined as 'a medicine that inhibits the growth of or destroys microorganisms.' The use of antibiotics is an important tool in the treatment of both human and animal disease. Unfortunately, these microorganisms can develop resistance to these antibiotics. To preserve the effectiveness of the antibiotics for the treatment of human and animal disease, it is important to use them only when needed.

Antibiotic resistance should not be confused with antibiotic residue. With resistance, the antibiotic is no longer effective in treating disease. Residue would be antibiotic left in the meat. Chicken is routinely checked to verify it **DOES NOT CONTAIN RESIDUES** from any medications used, including antibiotics.

It is important to note that most antibiotics that farmers use with their chicken flocks are NOT used in human medicine.

One of the main diseases that chicken producers have to deal with is called coccidiosis. It is caused by a tiny organism called protozoa (you need a microscope to see it). Despite its small size, it can have devastating effects on the health of an animal. Coccidia are common in all animals, whether a farm animal or a house pet.

There is a class of antibiotics called 'ionophores' and another group of antibiotics called 'non-antibiotic coccidiostats' (that is, they are not antibiotics). These are the medications used to prevent coccidiosis in chicken flocks. It is important to note that **THESE MEDICATIONS ARE NOT USED IN HUMAN MEDICINE.**

Most chickens are given an ionophore or non-antibiotic coccidiostat to prevent coccidiosis. The medications are only used under strict guidelines.

Just like people, chickens can get sick and it becomes necessary to treat the flock. In such cases, veterinarians have a responsibility to treat these flocks in a responsible and targeted manner.

NO ANTIBIOTIC RESIDUES ARE ALLOWED IN CHICKEN MEAT

The package label also says that the chicken can contain up to '5% retained water.' After chickens are harvested and processed, the chicken meat needs to be cooled quickly to prevent the growth of any spoilage bacteria, or any bacteria that could make you sick. To do this, the processed chickens are placed in cool tanks. A small amount of water from the



cool tank can be absorbed by the chicken meat. A 5% maximum is allowed. This is common for most of the chicken processed in the United States. If the chicken is air-chilled rather than chilled in a cool tank, very little water is absorbed by the chicken meat.

What about those stamps? All commercial chickens sold in the U.S. are individually inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for wholesomeness, which simply means it is safe to eat. All commercial chicken in the United States should have that stamp.

Chickens processed under inspection are also graded by the USDA inspector. Ready-to-cook (RTC) carcasses and parts are graded based on the amount of exposed meat, missing parts, and the presence of disjointed or broken bones. The possible grades are A, B, and C. If these standards are not met, they are a 'No grade.'

The other three stamps just verify that the USDA has verified that the chicken is wholesome and was hatched, raised, and harvested in the United States (and not an imported chicken). Any chicken sold in grocery stores in the United States could have this label.



Here is a second package of chicken. It is also boneless, skinless breast meat so, just like the first package, the chicken is 99% fat-free.

Just like the first package, the chickens were fed a vegetarian diet. The chickens also received no antibiotics ever. These are two label items that could be different between many different packages of chicken breasts.

The chickens are labeled as 'natural,' which the footnote indicates means that the chicken contains no artificial ingredients and was minimally processed.



It also says the chickens were not raised in cages and received no added hormones. We know that those labels could appear on any package of chicken produced in the United States. If you could read the

fine print at the bottom of the package you would see same disclaimer that 'Federal regulations do not permit the use of hormones in chickens.'

They also added the clarification of cage-free indicating that it means the chickens were raised in barns without cages.

As with the first package, the chicken can contain up to 5% retained water indicating that the chicken was cooled using a water cool tank.

This package also has the USDA Grade A and USDA inspection stamps.



This is a third package of boneless, skinless chicken breasts, although they have included the rib meat as well.

As with the other packages the chicken meat is 99% fat-free because it is skinless. The chickens were also fed a vegetarian diet and never received any antibiotics or hormones. The chicken was also cooled in a water tank, because it indicates the chicken can have up to 5% retained water. None of this makes the chicken different from any other chicken for sale.



What makes this package of chicken different from the previous two?

This package of chicken has one stamp and two claims that the other two packages do not. The first is the USDA organic stamp. This certifies that the chicken was raised according to the standards in the National Organic Program (NOP). This requires that no animal by-products be fed (thus the vegetarian diet), that the chickens

must be given a feed containing organically produced feedstuffs. For the plant portion of the diet, that means that the crops are not 'genetically modified' and were produced without the use of pesticides or herbicides.

The extra label states that the chicken are 'non-genetically engineered.' **There are no 'genetically engineered' chickens!**

The chickens are also labeled as 'free range.' According to the current organic production regulations, organic chickens must have access to the outdoors. It does not say the chickens actually have to go outside, just have access to it. It also does not say what the quality of the area outside the barn should be.

The term 'free-range' does not have a legal definition, but it usually refers to chickens that have 'access' to the outdoors. The term does not mean they are on lush forage pastures. For chickens raised outdoors, on pasture, the label is typically 'pasture-raised.'

'Pasture-raised' chickens, however, are not free to wander in that pasture. To protect the slow moving meat chickens from predators, they are often housed in floorless, movable pens, similar to the ones in the photos. The pens are moved regularly (often every day) to move the chickens to the fresh pasture.



Chickens raised in pasture pens surrounded by an electric fence (to protect the chickens from ground predators)



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- **'Fresh'** means the chicken has never been frozen.
- **'Fed all vegetarian diets'** and **'No animal by-products'** both mean that no animal by-products were included in feed.
- **'All Natural'** means that the chicken has been minimally processed and there are no artificial ingredients.
- **'Raised cage-free'** means that the chickens are in a barn without cages. This label can be on all chicken produced in the United States.
- **'No hormones or steroids'** can be on all chicken produced in the United States because 'Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones and steroids in poultry' and they are not necessary.
- **'No antibiotics ever'** indicates that the chickens were never given antibiotics for disease prevention or treatment.
- **'Certified organic'** indicates that the chickens were produced according to the regulations set by the USDA National Organic Program.
- All chicken breast without skin is **'99% fat-free'**.
- **'Free range'** indicates that the chickens were raised with access to the outdoors. It does not indicate that they are all outside or that they are on pasture.
- **'Pasture raised'** indicates that the chickens were raised on pasture. It does not indicate that the chickens are free to run around outside.
- **'Inspected for wholesomeness by the U.S. Department of Agriculture'** should be on all commercial chicken produced in the United States since each individual carcasses is inspected for wholesomeness before it can be sold.
- **'USDA Grade A'** can be on poultry carcasses and parts that have been graded according to the standards set by USDA.

