

LESSON 3 – WHAT DO ALL THOSE LABELS MEAN?

Time Needed

- 30-45 minutes depending on skill level

Skill/Grade Level

- Grades 3-5

Core Area

- Family and Consumer Sciences

Life Skills

- Critical Thinking
- Decision making
- Disease prevention
- Healthy lifestyle choices

Educational Standards

- Health Education 3.1.2, 4.1.2, and 5.1.2

Objectives

Through the Kentucky Farm to School Curriculum related to chicken, participants will:

- **Learn** what the labels on chicken products really mean
- **Understand** how marketing can be used to confuse consumers

Introduction to Content

This lesson builds on lesson two. Once the youth have a clear understanding of the role chicken can play in a balanced diet, we move on to what is involved in purchasing chicken. Chicken comes with a lot of claims on the packaging. What do all those claims mean and are they worth the extra cost charged?

Background Information

USDA Resources included:

- ◆ Meat and poultry labeling (Available in English and Spanish)
- ◆ The poultry label says 'fresh' (Available in English only)
- ◆ Natural flavorings on meat and poultry labels (Available in English and Spanish)
- ◆ Water in meat and poultry (Available in English and Spanish)
- ◆ Food product dating (Available in English and Spanish)

Sizes of chicken:

- **Broiler:** A young chicken raised for meat. This is the most common size of chicken found in your local grocery.
- **Cornish hen:** A small broiler chicken harvested at a young age. It is NOT a game bird (which is a bird hunted for sport or food).
- **Roaster:** A larger chicken of 5.5 pounds or more and less than 12 weeks of age.

Food companies use a lot of different marketing techniques to sell their products. Packaging is an important component of marketing. The packaging design can affect consumers perception of the value of the product. This lesson will teach youth to understand the labels on chicken meat products and limit the impact of such marketing techniques.

Learn more at www.kentucky4h.org or contact your county extension office.



Labels on Chicken

There are a variety of different claims that can be made on chicken meat products. According to the USDA factsheet:

- **Fresh:** Raw poultry products whose internal temperature has never been below 26°F (± 2°F). Should bear the statement 'keep refrigerated.'
- **Natural:** Refers to a product containing no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed. 'Minimal processed' means that the product has not be fundamentally altered. If the term natural is used on packaging, it must explain the term with footnotes such as 'no artificial ingredients; minimally processed.'
- **Certified:** The term implies that the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) have officially evaluated a poultry product for grade or other quality characteristic. The term can also be used with a third-party certification.
- **No hormones added:** HORMONES ARE NOT ALLOWED IN RAISING POULTRY. As a result, if the claim 'no hormones added' is used on labels, it must include the statement 'Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones.'
- **No antibiotics:** The producers must provide sufficient documentation to USDA demonstrating that antibiotics have not been used in production.
- **Organic:** The National Organic Program (NOP) is the federal regulatory framework that governs the use of certified organic on food productions, including poultry. This is the only label not overseen by the Food and Drug Agency (FDA).
- **Free range or Free roaming:** Producers must demonstrate to USDA that the poultry have been allowed ACCESS to the outside.
- **Frozen:** The temperature of the raw, frozen poultry is 0°F or below.
- **Kosher:** This term may only be used on poultry products prepared under the supervision of a Jewish Rabbi.
- **Halal:** This term may only be used on poultry products prepared according to Islamic law and under Islamic authority.
- **Mechanically separated poultry:** This is the term used when poultry meat is separated from bone using mechanical means. That is, the product is produced by forcing bones with meat attached through a sieve or similar device under high pressure to separate bone from the edible tissue. If this is not included on the label, the meat may have been separated from the bone manually.
- **Oven prepared:** This term refers to product that is fully cooked and ready to eat.
- **Retained water:** Poultry are NOT injected with water, but some water is absorbed during cooling in a chill-tank. This is a large vat of cold, moving water. The chill-tank lowers the temperature of the chicken carcasses quickly. During this chilling process, chickens will absorb some of the water. This amount must be prominently declared on the label. It is common for chicken meat to have 8 to 12% retained water on the label.

Other claims that have been made on chicken products:

- **Cage-free:** All meat chickens are produced in large barns without cages, so all chicken meat is raised cage-free.
- **All vegetable or vegetarian diet:** Most poultry feed is made from corn and soybean meal (by-product after removal of oil from soybeans). Sometimes fishmeal, or meat and poultry by-products are added to the feed. These are excellent protein sources which also contain vitamins and minerals but cannot be included in vegetarian diets.
- **Farm-raised:** All chickens raised in the U.S. for meat are farm-raised. They are typically raised on family farms under contract with a chicken company (such as Tyson Foods Inc., Pilgrim's Pride Corp., Sanderson Farms Inc, Perdue Foods, Koch Foods Inc. These five companies account for more than half of the ready-to-cook chicken produced in the U.S. each year).
- **Pasture-raised:** This term refers to chickens that are PRIMARILY raised outdoors on pasture. It is important to note that young chicks need to be provided supplemental heat for the first few weeks because they are unable to maintain their body temperature. This is usually for the first three weeks. Since chickens can be harvested at six weeks of age, the time on pasture is only 50% of their growout.

Labels on Chicken

ACTIVITY 1 – What do YOU think the labels on chicken meat mean and are these labels important in a purchasing decision

Materials Needed

Activity Items:

Activity sheets: Chicken-What do these labels mean to me?

Instructions for Activity

In this activity, youth will examine some of the labels on chicken meat sold in grocery stores.

Materials need:

1. Writing assignment sheets: Chicken-What do these labels mean to me?
2. Handout: Chicken – what do all those labels mean?
3. Activity: Crossword: Chicken – What do all those labels mean? It can be used as a post-test to see what they learned

Activity:

1. Have the youth work alone or in groups to complete the writing assignment on what some of the labels on chicken meat mean to them and whether these issues are important in deciding which chicken products to buy.
2. Go over the claims included in the writing assignment and compare what the youth thought the labels mean and what they really do mean.



Claim 1. No added hormones or steroids.

Truth: No poultry is produced using hormones or steroids. Aside from the fact that it is illegal to do so, it is not required. Genetic improvement, good nutrition, and good management are the reasons for the fast growth and excellent feed efficiency of meat chickens. So, this label could be included on all chicken produced in the US.



Claim 2. Raised cage free.

Truth: In the United States, no meat chickens are raised in cages so this label could be on all chicken produced in the US

Claim 3. All natural.

Truth: The term 'Natural' simply means that no artificial ingredients are included and that the chicken is minimally processed. The only processing done was the slaughter, defeathering, and removal of head, feet, and internal organs. The meat itself has not been changed, so this label could be on all chicken produced in the US.

Labels on Chicken

Claim 4. No Antibiotics ever.

Truth: Some antibiotics provide important tools for poultry producers to prevent or treat disease. Most of these antibiotics are not used in human medicine, although some are. Poultry producers are careful in the use of any antibiotics. Before any flock of chickens are shipped to the processing facility, they are tested to make sure there are no medication residues present in the meat. So, there is no concern of antibiotic residue in chicken meat, and you will not be receiving antibiotics when you eat chicken meat. So, it is not a product concern. The main concern related to the use of antibiotics in chicken meat production is 'antibiotic resistance.' This relates to an organisms development of resistance to an antibiotic. In such cases, the antibiotic would no longer be effective in treating the disease the organism causes. There is a concern that this antibiotic resistance could be transferred to organisms that cause human diseases, reducing the medications available to treat human diseases. The risk of antibiotic resistance from use with meat chickens is not clear and is highly debated. Antibiotics use in poultry production is regulated to ensure minimal use to limit the development of antibiotic resistance.



Claim 5. 100% vegetarian fed.

Truth: This claim goes together with the claim 'no animal by-products' and relates to the types of feed ingredients used in the diets of the chickens. Chickens are omnivores, which means they naturally eat animal and plant products. Some people, however, prefer that animal by-products not be fed to the chickens they eat. If animal and poultry by-products are not used in animal feeds, however, they would end up in landfills and thus become an environmental issue.

Optional addition to activity: Compare the different prices of chicken products with different claims on them.



For example, the Perdue boneless breast chicken was originally \$3.99/pound but was on sale for \$1.99/pound. The Simple Truth organic boneless breast was originally \$7.99/pound but was on sale for \$6.99/pound. Is the price difference worth it? That is a personal judgement.

Labels on Chicken

Extended Learning:

Go over the handout 'Chicken – what do those labels mean?' review what some other labels that can be found on chicken meat actually mean.

Share: Example of discussion starter question:

- ◆ What surprised you the most about the different claims that can be found on chicken meat?

Generalize: Example of discussion starter question

- ◆ Which of these issues are important to you?

Extended learning:

- ◆ Have the students take the handout on what labels on chicken meat mean home and ask their parents or guardians what they think they mean and what is important in their purchase decisions for chicken meat.

Reporting Your Success:

Initial Outcomes: As a result of this lesson, youth were able to:

- Understand what the different labels on chicken meat mean

Intermediate Outcomes: As a result of this lesson, youth were able to:

- Evaluate which of the claims on chicken meat are important to them.

Long Term Outcomes: As the youth grow up, they will be able to:

- Make informed decisions with regards to the purchase of chicken products

Credits:

This lesson plan was written by Dr. Jacquie Jacob, Department of Animal and Food Sciences, University of Kentucky. March 2024. Development of this curriculum was funded by the U.S. Poultry and Egg Foundation and the Kentucky Poultry Federation.

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