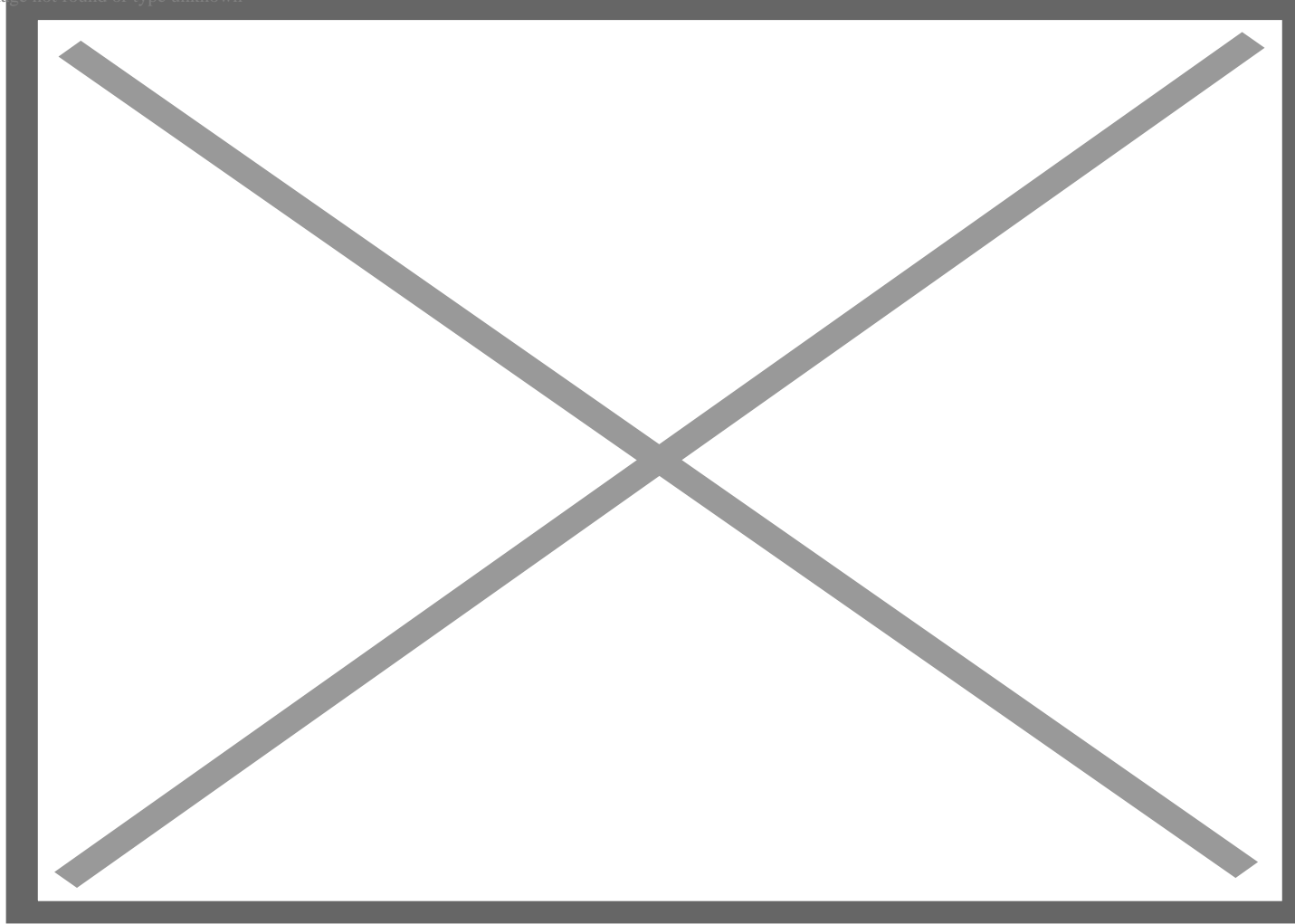


Food label primer: What does 'organic', 'natural' and 'non-GMO' mean?

The organic, natural, and non-GMO food marketing labels differ in terms of what they mean and whether they are certified and inspected by government agencies. However, none of the labels mean that the product is local or produced by small or family farms.

Organic

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Credit: USDA

The U.S. Department of Agriculture establishes and oversees certified organic food rules. Each type of product (produce, livestock, and processed products) has slightly different rules, though all emphasize prevention over treatment. Organic does not allow genetically modified seeds or inputs. Studies are mixed on whether organic food contains more nutrients, but organic produce does have less pesticide residue. Organic farms are inspected annually, and only producers that are certified and inspected by approved

certification agencies may call themselves organic. However, very small farms that follow organic practices can use “Certified-Exempt” without going through the official certification process.

Organic regulations for **produce**, like fruits and vegetables, dictate what kind of pesticides farmers can use. Many believe that certified organic means no pesticides, but this is a misconception. Instead, the program provides lists of approved and non-approved pesticides and substances. Each organic producer must create a management plan that explains how they will maintain soil fertility (through activities like cover cropping) and manage pests and weeds.

For **livestock**, all grazing land and feed must be certified organic, meaning that it was grown without using any banned pesticides or genetically modified ingredients. Animals cannot receive preventative antibiotics or added growth hormones. Ruminant animals (such as cattle, sheep, and goats) must have access to grazing pasture for their region’s entire grazing season, and a minimum of 120 days. For poultry, housing must allow for chickens to stand and move about freely and must provide access to the outdoors.

Processed products, like granola bars, must have at least 95% organic ingredients and can include approved organic substances. However, a product that states “made with organic ingredients” may only be 70% organic. The certification program must approve the other ingredients. No ingredients can use genetic modification.

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Natural



Credit: WBEZ

The processing technique used to create the food product defines natural. There is no certifying agency or inspection a manufacturer must go through to call themselves natural. The USDA sets the definition for meat using the term natural, which is that the product contains “no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed.” The FDA sets the definition for non-animal food products as “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”. Therefore, food processing is the only indicator used for natural. No studies suggest that food labeled natural is healthier. Natural food labels include all production practices.

Non-GMO/Bioengineered



Credit: Chosen Foods

A genetically modified organism (GMO) has genes changed using genetic engineering, rather than traditional crossbreeding. Most scientists agree that genetically modified foods are as safe for consumers as non-GMO foods. When it comes to genetic modification, or bioengineering, there are two types of labels you might see. Food manufacturers and third parties created the non-GMO label. Ingredients labeled non-GMO cannot use genetic modification. However, only a few products (such as corn and soybeans) even have a genetically modified version. No governmental agencies such as the FDA or USDA certify the non-GMO label. Foods without a GMO version can have a non-GMO label. You can find the full list of products with a genetically modified version at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/be/bioengineered-foods-list>.

Bioengineered is a new label that becomes mandatory on January 1, 2022; USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service is administering it. Labels must appear on all food products that are genetically modified. However, genetic differences are undetectable in highly refined products, like corn syrup or soybean oil, and they will not need the label. Additionally, products made from animals who received bioengineered

feed will not be labeled. While the USDA has created a bioengineered label for manufacturers to use, they may also use a QR code or electronic disclosure, provide a number for a text message, or simply use the phrase “bioengineered food” or “contains bioengineered food ingredients.”

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