

Seeing Through Health Claims

Supports: Building Block 4 — Labels, Health Claims & Grocery Shopping

Why It Matters

The front of a package is a billboard, and its job is to make a food sound as healthy as possible. Words like "natural," "light," and "made with whole grain" are carefully chosen to catch your eye, but they do not always mean what you would guess. The good news is you already hold the tool that cuts through the marketing: the facts panel and ingredient list on the back. A quick flip of the package lets you decide for yourself, without being swayed by the sales pitch.

What to Know

What the buzzwords really mean

Front-of-package claims are often technically true but easy to misread. Knowing the fine print helps you take them for what they are worth.

- "All natural" usually just means no artificial ingredients, not that a food is whole or minimally processed.
- "Made with whole grain" only counts for a lot if whole grain sits near the top of the ingredient list; "whole wheat flour" is a whole grain, plain "wheat flour" is not.
- "Low fat" or "fat free" can mean extra sugar, salt, or additives were added back for flavor.
- "Made with real fruit" may still be missing the fiber and nutrients of the whole fruit.
- "Sugar-free" often means artificial sweeteners were used instead.

Let the back of the package decide

When a claim catches your attention, treat it as a prompt to flip the package over rather than a reason to buy. Check the ingredient list and Nutrition Facts to see what is actually inside. If the claim holds up, wonderful. If it does not, you have saved yourself from paying for the marketing.

Trust the panel over the promise. Front-of-package words are advertising; the ingredient list and facts panel are the receipts. When they disagree, believe the back of the box.

Try This

Think of a product you have bought partly because of a health claim on the front. Picture flipping it over and reading the back with fresh eyes, checking whether the promise matches the panel.

- ? Which front-of-package claim tends to catch your eye the most?
- ? When you turned a favorite product over, did the ingredient list match the claim?
- ? What is one claim you will double-check on the back before buying next time?