

Seeing Through Health Claims

The front tells a story. The back tells the whole story.

A few of the phrases on a front panel have a legal definition behind them; most do not. **Either way, the answer is on the back of the same package** — in the ingredient list and the Nutrition Facts panel.

THE FRONT OF THE PACKAGE — FIVE PHRASES, NO ANSWERS



A made-up package. Every phrase on it is decoded at right.

WHAT EACH PHRASE ACTUALLY MEANS —

ON THE FRONT THE RULE BEHIND IT

“All natural”	FDA has not defined it for food in general. For meat and poultry, USDA does: no artificial ingredient or added color, minimally processed.
“Made with whole grain”	FDA has not defined it, and no amount is required. Ingredients run heaviest first, so where a whole grain falls in that list is the answer.
“Low fat” • “Fat free”	Both are defined: fat free is under 0.5 g of fat per serving, low fat is 3 g or less. Neither one speaks to sugar or sodium.
“Made with real fruit”	No definition and no minimum. But a picture of a fruit counts as a flavor claim: if there is too little of it, the name has to say “flavored.”
“Sugar-free”	Under 0.5 g of sugars per serving — which is not the same as low calorie. If the food is not also low calorie, the label has to say so.

THE BOTTOM LINE

When the front of the box and the back of the box disagree, believe the back.

TURN ONE OVER —

Find a package with one of these phrases on it, circle its row above, and turn it over.

THE PHRASE, AS PRINTED

THE FIRST TWO INGREDIENTS ON THE BACK

Worth a second look next time you shop, or fine as it is? Your call:

Sources: U.S. Food and Drug Administration — **Use of the Term Natural on Food Labeling** and the draft guidance **Whole Grain Label Statements** · 21 CFR 101.4(a), 101.9, 101.22(i), 101.60(c), 101.62(b) · USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, **Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms**. The package above is a made-up example, not a product.

Wellness education, not medical advice. For questions about your health, medications, or a condition you manage, discuss them with your primary care provider.