

Natural vs Organic

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“Natural,” “all-natural,” “100% organic,” “organic,” and “made with organic ingredients” – these are some of the many different ways you will find products advertised today. But what does it mean? Are they basically the same thing? Does it really matter if a product is “all-natural” or “organic”? Let’s flesh out these questions and answers to see the bigger picture in greater detail.

Within the last few decades, consumers discovered that all of the tens of thousands of chemicals that came out of the petrochemical boom of the 1950s may not have been as wholesome and harmless as once believed. A new brand of shopper has arisen – and with it, a new advertising tactic – based on the credo that just because a scientist can make it, doesn’t mean your body can take it! For the most part, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has attempted to protect consumers by monitoring some of the different food labels that open this article. But not all of them (see below)! And unfortunately, not all consumers have an equal understanding of what the different terms used actually mean. So here’s a quick break down:

Natural and **All-Natural**: You might be surprised to know that these terms are *not* guarded by the FDA. That is, there are no formal definitions used by the FDA to which it can force manufacturers to comply.^{1,2} By and large, the labeling of something as either “natural” or “all-natural” is *supposed* to mean that the product “does not contain added color, artificial flavors or synthetic substances,”³ but in reality, it’s very easy to find these words on foods and drinks that are loaded with artificial colors, flavors, preservatives, and any other number of chemically-derived additives.⁴ In fact, the FDA really only concerns itself with these terms when they are related to beef or chicken.⁵ Your “all-natural” breakfast cereal or coffee creamer? That never even hits the FDA radar.

100% Organic, **Organic**, and **Made With Organic Ingredients**: These are a series of labels that *are* protected by the FDA, and they each mean something different. In general, when a food is “organic,” it means that it is farmed, grown, or otherwise produced in a way that encourages soil and water conservation, reduces pollution, and uses non-chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides.⁶ When you see it on food packaging, a food that is “100% organic” is made with 100% organic ingredients and can bear the desirable USDA organic label.⁷ If the label reads just “organic,” then it means that the product in question is at least 95% organic; this too can use the USDA Organic label.⁸ And if the product says “made with organic ingredients,” it indicates that, while it isn’t fully organic, at least 70% of its ingredients are organic. These foods cannot use the organic label. Finally, if a food product has less than 70% organic ingredients, it is not allowed to use the term on any of its labeling.



So what does this mean to you?

Just about any holistically minded health enthusiast or health practitioner will advise you to make sure that, as often as possible, the products you buy and consume are 100% organic. Depending on different variables, of course, that may not be feasible for everyone. When you cannot get your products in some organic variety, looking for the labels “natural” and “all-natural” may not be a bad idea. At the very least, it signifies that the manufacturer is interested in catching your eye, hopefully, by offering something that isn’t completely synthetic.

Still, you need to be careful when buying “natural” and “all-natural” products. It’s good to remember that these labels are loose and relatively meaningless; what they *should* mean to you is: “Read the label!” That is, look at the ingredients and determine for yourself whether they are things you have heard of before (and probably have in your kitchen), or whether they are multi-syllabic, unpronounceable, hyphenated ingredients that were obviously boiled up in a beaker.

The more organic products you buy, the more commonly they will show up in the marketplace and the cheaper they will become. The more organic products you use, the healthier you and your family can be, since you’ll be effectively reducing your exposure to a number of synthetic chemicals that may contribute to a host of health problems. So, aim for organics and try to follow common sense eating patterns that engender good health. When you see “natural” or “all-natural,” remember that that really means you should read the labels. Knowledge is power!

¹ What Does “Natural” Mean When it Appears on a Food Label? (n.d.). *American Dietetic Association*, Retrieved August 27, 2011 from <http://www.eatright.org/Public/content.aspx?id=6442453268>

² Estabrook, B. (2008). Politics of the Plate: “Natural” Lies. Retrieved August 27, 2011 from <http://www.gourmet.com/foodpolitics/2008/08/politics-of-the-plate-natural-labeling>

³ What Does “Natural” Mean When it Appears on a Food Label? (n.d.). *American Dietetic Association*, Retrieved August 27, 2011 from <http://www.eatright.org/Public/content.aspx?id=6442453268>

⁴ Eng, M. (2009). Organic vs. Natural: A Source of Confusion in Food Labeling. *Chicago Tribune*, Retrieved August 27, 2011 from http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-07-10/business/chi-natural-foods-10-jul10_1_organic-food-cornucopia-institute-mark-kastel

⁵ Mercola, J. (2010). Many “All Natural” Foods Are Actually Heavily Processed. Retrieved August 27, 2011 from <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2010/10/27/many-all-natural-foods-are-actually-heavily-processed.aspx>

⁶ Organic Foods. (2006). Retrieved August 27, 2011 from <http://usda-fda.com/articles/organic.htm>

⁷ Certified Organic Label Guide. (2011). Retrieved August 27, 2011 from <http://www.organic.org/articles/showarticle/article-201>

⁸ Certified Organic Label Guide. (2011). Retrieved August 27, 2011 from <http://www.organic.org/articles/showarticle/article-201>