



6 Reasons Why 'Natural' on a Label is Meaningless

By Sally Deenan

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The marketing term "natural" is often meaningless. Nevertheless, it is the most common green claim used on cosmetics and kids' products, according to a report called *The Seven Sins of Greenwashing* prepared by the green marketing firm TerraChoice. Even worse, each new year brings a slew of new foods and drinks claiming to be "all natural."

Here's one reason why: There is no official, regulated definition of the term "natural" for anything other than meat and poultry. No independent agency certifies "natural" claims on those sodas, cereals and other products. "Natural" can easily be confused with "organic" (a more trustworthy food label) – but organic doesn't mean natural, and vice versa. (To help you know the difference, read Consumer Ally's guide to food label claims found [here](#).) Marketers know the label brings a warm feeling, so it is remarkably common.

"Natural" is such an abused term that it should send your B.S. meter spinning. Warns *Consumer Reports'* GreenerChoices.org: "The producer or manufacturer decides whether to use the claim and is not free from its own self-

interest."

More bad surprises:

1. You pick up a package of pork at the supermarket counter and feel good to see the label "natural." Get this: It doesn't mean the animal was raised naturally. Nope. Per federal rules, "natural" describes how the slab of meat was handled by butchers and processors. "It starts with the animal's death," cautions Patty Lovera, assistant director of Food & Water Watch. Basically, the U.S. Department of Agriculture requires each meat to have no artificial ingredients or added color and only minimal processing. Also, the label must spell out why the meat is called "natural," although I've seen this label regularly used without required elaboration. (See that definition from the U.S. Department of Agriculture [here](#).)

2. Your frozen pepperoni pizza falls under the purview of the USDA because it contains meat. So it can't contain added color and artificial ingredients if it bears the label "natural." Yet, a frozen cheese pizza falls under the US Food and Drug Administration's purview – and

it has absolutely no standard definition for "natural." So marketers hoping to shine a healthier sheen might use the natural claim on a cheese pizza. But they can't on a pepperoni pie. Isn't it remarkable how arbitrary this seems to be? Similarly, chicken noodle soup and a fresh cut of steak are subject to the Agriculture Department's definition, but meatless foods aren't. A whopping 80 percent of the food supply falls under the lenient umbrella of the FDA, says Bruce Silverglade, legal affairs director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

3. You probably figure that a fresh raw chicken is just a fresh raw chicken. Chicken can be labeled "natural" under USDA rules even if it's injected with saltwater or chicken broth, which adds weight and unhealthy salt and makes your chicken more expensive at checkout. Examples: Tyson's "100 percent natural" boneless skinless chicken breasts may look for all the world like plain raw chicken, but they actually contain chicken broth and sodium. Ditto for Pilgrim's Pride "100 percent natural" fresh drumsticks, which actually contain 380 milligrams of sodium per serving.

4. OK, so while the FDA hasn't come up with a hard-and-fast rule about "natural," the federal agency has said this – you shouldn't use the term "natural" on a product that contains the preservatives citric acid or calcium chloride. But you'll see the ingredients anyway on various "natural" products. Examples cited in the

Food Labeling Chaos report put out by CSPI include Hunt's "100% Natural" tomato sauce and Snapple's "all natural" tea. A spokesman for Snapple's manufacturer, Greg Artkop of Dr Pepper Snapple Group, countered that his company uses "natural citric acid from a natural fermentation process" and that citric acid is allowed in products labeled "organic" under federal organic rules as stated here. (CSPI's Silverglade agreed that naturally made citric acid is natural, but factory-made citric acid isn't – and consumers can't tell from product labels which form is used. It isn't a health or safety issue, but a pocketbook issue. "The concern is overpaying" if the citric acid is factory-made, he says.)

5. You might figure that if a meat label says it's "naturally raised," that means the animal was raised in a natural way, right? Wrong again. Just before the Bush Administration departed Washington in January 2009, its USDA proposed a gift for America's meat producers: It enacted a new rule that, according to Consumers Union, allowed the "naturally raised" label to be affixed to "an animal that has come from ... cloned or genetically engineered stock, was physically altered, raised in confinement without ever seeing the light of day or green of pasture, in poor hygiene conditions with a diet laced in pesticides." Urvashi Rangan, director of technical policy at Consumers Union, told AOL that the rule, which is in effect but has not yet been used by meat marketers, "falls significantly short of consumer expectations ... and only adds to the roster of misleading label claims

approved by USDA for so-called natural meat."

report says. "The worst result of greenwashing would be to give up."

6. Irritatingly, to find out what a product means by the term "natural," you need to contact the company to ask its definition and trust what it says. Who's got time to do that? We checked a few claims. Examples: Silk soy milk made by White Wave Foods uses the term natural to mean "no artificial preservatives, no artificial flavors, no artificial sweeteners including high-fructose corn syrup and no artificial colors," said spokesperson Sara Loveday. "And we also use all non-(genetically-modified organism) soybeans." That's largely how Publix and Winn-Dixie supermarkets use the term in their natural-market areas, except neither mentions genetically-modified organisms (GMOs). Winn-Dixie's web site also expressly states natural products contain no synthetic oils. Yeesh, such variation.

"It's terribly confusing for consumers," Silverglade says.

What needs to happen: The burden is on the FDA to come up with a definition of natural, Silverglade and others say. And the FDA and USDA have to work together to make one definition across all foods.

What you can do in the meantime, as advised by the TerraChoice report, *Seven Sins of Greenwashing*: Support greener products that you know are greener. Consumers wield "enormous power to shape the marketplace," the