

FOOD LABELS

WHAT'S THAT MEAN?

Food by any other names might not be what you think

BY DENISE SCHIPANI

Shoppers depend on labels—how else would you be able to figure out if the cereal box you're holding is truly "part of a complete breakfast" or just another sugar-delivery system? But labels are far from straightforward. Here's a cheat sheet to help you decode claims.

BEWARE-OF-PACKAGE CLAIMS

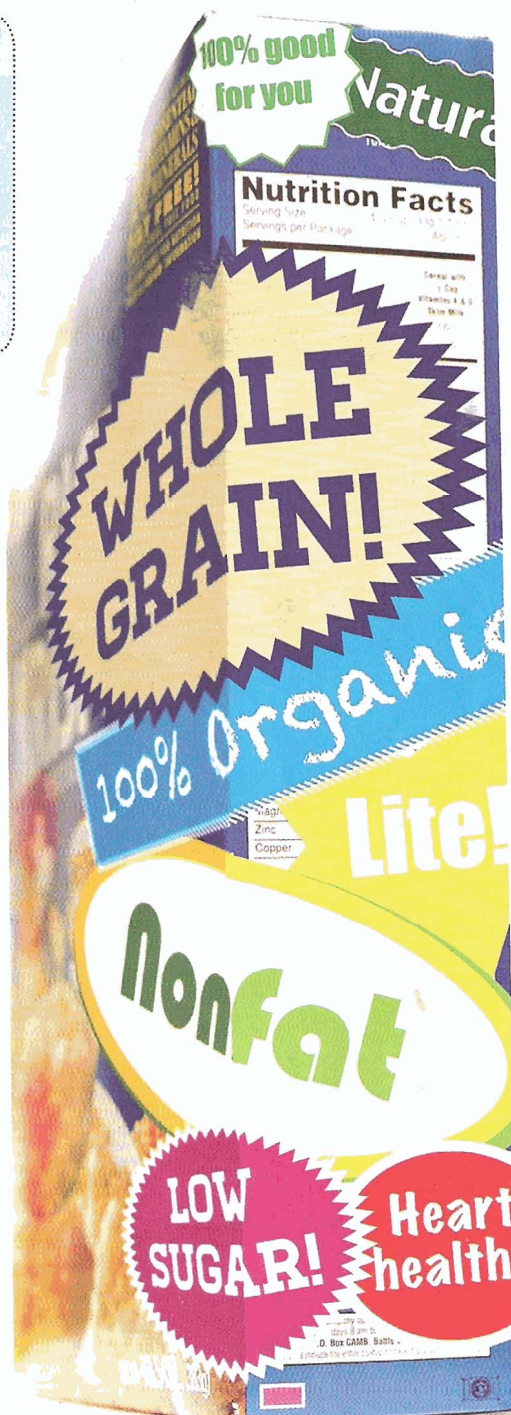
The FDA has no jurisdiction over food manufacturers' use of phrases like "supports a healthy immune system" and "supports heart health." So buyer beware, says Dr. Michael Greger, founder of NutritionFacts.org.

NATURAL IS NOT THE SAME AS HEALTHY

Lots of ingredients are natural, including fat, sodium and sugar. So don't treat "natural" and "all-natural"—two claims not regulated by the FDA—as a green light. Scrutinize the ingredient list and nutrition facts.

GET THE GRAINS

Whole grain is the holy grail. Foods with this label must have more than 51 percent of its content made from the whole grain. Don't be fooled by whole wheat, which may not be the whole grain. "Cracked, crushed and stone-ground also imply a less-refined grain," Greger says.



KNOW "NO" AND "NON"

Claims such as nonfat and fat-free, low- and no-sugar, light and lite are regulated and carry specific meanings. But they're not always what you think, says Dr. Timothy Harlan, author of *Just Tell Me What to Eat!* "A nonfat or fat-free label allows for no more than half a gram of fat per serving," he says. Find more definitions at DrGourmet.com.

WATCH THE SWEET WORDS

Manufacturers try to make their foods seem more wholesome, and sugar is one sneaky culprit. By law, ingredients must be listed in order of prominence. One workaround is splitting the total sweetener content into different types, all of which then appear lower on the list. You might see agave, brown rice syrup, corn syrup and, of course, sugar. "But the cumulative effect is that this is a high-sugar food," Greger says. More sugary clues: the suffix "-ose," as in fructose, sucrose and glucose.

TRUST THE USDA SEAL

"Anyone can put 'organic' on a label, and they often do," Harlan says. But for a food to carry the green-and-white USDA Organic seal, it must be certified. Also, he says, "USDA-certified organic foods will not be genetically modified, and since the food industry has so far successfully fought labeling GMOs in foods, this is the only way you can be 100 percent sure." Check the Environmental Working Group's "dirty dozen" list for fruits and vegetables most vulnerable to pesticides and know when to splurge on organic varieties.