



Meat Label Cheat Sheet

What common U.S. meat label words mean, in plain language, with the official source for each. Checked October 2026.

Natural

No artificial ingredients or added color, and only minimally processed. The label must explain the term (e.g., "no artificial ingredients; minimally processed"). It describes processing, not how the animal was raised.¹

Organic

The USDA organic seal may only be used on products certified by a USDA-accredited certifier. "Organic" products contain at least 95% organic ingredients (not counting salt and water). Organic alone does not mean grass-fed.^{3,2}

No antibiotics added

Allowed on meat and poultry labels when the producer gives FSIS enough documentation to show the animals were raised without antibiotics.¹

USDA inspection mark

The round USDA mark shows federal inspection. The number in or near it ("EST." for meat, "P-" for poultry) identifies the plant. State-inspected meat carries a state mark, and some exempt products, like custom-processed meat, carry neither.^{6,7}

Kosher / Halal

"Kosher" means prepared under rabbinical supervision; "halal" means handled under Islamic law and Islamic authority. **USDA does not certify** kosher or halal. A "certified" claim must name the certifier.^{1,9}

Cell-cultivated (cell-cultured)

Grown from animal cells in a controlled facility. FDA oversees cell growth, then FSIS oversees harvest, processing and labeling; labels need FSIS approval first. USDA approved the term "cell-cultivated chicken" in June 2023.^{11,12}

Grass-fed / 100% grass-fed

FSIS treats these as the **same claim**: cattle fed only forage (grass, hay, silage) after weaning, no grain or grain by-products, never confined to a feedlot, with continuous pasture access in the growing season. "Grass finished" is **not** the same; those cattle may have eaten grain.²

Pasture-raised

FSIS strongly encourages documentation that the animals spent the majority of their lives on pasture, meaning land mostly covered by grass or other plants. "Free range" poultry must have continuous, free access to the outdoors during their normal growing cycle.²

USDA Prime, Choice, Select

Beef quality grades based mainly on marbling and the animal's maturity. Prime has the most marbling, then Choice, then Select. Grades describe eating quality, **not safety**. Grading is voluntary and paid for by the company.^{4,5}

"Product of USA"

Since Jan. 1, 2026, this voluntary claim (or "Made in the USA") on FSIS-regulated meat and poultry means the animal was **born, raised, slaughtered and processed** in the United States. Companies must keep records that support it.⁸

Plant-based

Made from plants and generally regulated by FDA. FDA's January 2025 draft guidance (not final) recommends the name state the plant source, like "soy-based" or "black bean mushroom veggie patties."¹⁰

Quick checks at the store

1. Read the full product name.
2. Read the ingredient list.
3. Find the inspection mark and EST/P number.
4. Look for the certifier's name on "certified" claims.
5. Ask the butcher, farmer or restaurant.

"Real meat" is Real Meat Directory's own shorthand for meat from raised or harvested animals. It is not a legal term. Plant-based and cell-cultivated products are legitimate choices; our directory simply focuses on meat from raised or harvested animals. This sheet is general educational information, not legal, religious or nutrition advice. Rules change, so check the sources.

SOURCES (CHECKED OCT. 18, 2026)

1. USDA FSIS: Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms. fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/meat-and-poultry-labeling-terms
2. USDA FSIS Guideline FSIS-GD-2024-0006: Substantiating Animal-Raising or Environment-Related Labeling Claims (Aug 2024). fsis.usda.gov/guidelines/2024-0006
3. USDA AMS: Labeling Organic Products. ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic/labeling
4. USDA AMS: Beef Grading Shields. ams.usda.gov/grades-standards/beef/shields-and-marbling-pictures
5. USDA FSIS: Ground Beef and Food Safety (inspection vs. grading). fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/meat/ground-beef-and-food-safety
6. USDA FSIS: How to Find the USDA Establishment (EST) Number. fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/how-find-usda-establishment
7. USDA FSIS: State Cooperative Inspection Programs. fsis.usda.gov/inspection/state-inspection-programs
8. USDA FSIS: Voluntary Labeling of FSIS-Regulated Products with U.S.-Origin Claims (final rule; compliance Jan 1, 2026). fsis.usda.gov/policy/federal-register-rulemaking/federal-register-rules/voluntary-labeling-fsis-regulated
9. USDA FSIS Constituent Update, June 5, 2020 ("Certified Kosher" / "Certified Halal" claims). fsis.usda.gov/news-events/news-press-releases/constituent-update-june-5-2020
10. FDA: Draft Guidance, Labeling of Plant-Based Alternatives to Animal-Derived Foods (Jan 2025). fda.gov/regulatory-information/search-fda-guidance-documents/draft-guidance-industry-labeling-plant-based-alternatives-animal-derived-foods
11. USDA FSIS: Human Food Made with Cultured Animal Cells. fsis.usda.gov/inspection/compliance-guidance/labeling/labeling-policies/human-food-made-cultured-animal-cells
12. Congressional Research Service: Cell-Cultivated Meat: An Overview (R47697). congress.gov/crs-product/R47697