

Meat, Eggs and Dairy Label Guide

Below is information about common food labels as they relate to farm animal welfare. The ASPCA recommends that consumers who buy meat, eggs or dairy seek out products that meet the standards of the welfare certifications checked (✓) below. The standards set by these third-party-verified programs represent a spectrum of better ways to raise animals, from pasture-based farming to enriched indoor environments, but all offer animals significantly better lives than conventional farms. *To learn more, visit [ASPCA.org/FarmAnimal](https://www.aspcaprogram.org/farm-animal)*

CERTIFICATIONS



Continuous access to pasture or range. No feedlots. Cage confinement, hormones and subtherapeutic antibiotics prohibited. Standards extend to breeding animals, transport and slaughter. Compliance verified by auditors. Represents a very significant improvement over conventional standards. [AnimalWelfareApproved.us](https://www.animalwelfareapproved.us)



Continuous outdoor access for ruminants. Cage confinement, hormones and subtherapeutic antibiotics prohibited. Outdoor access not required for birds and pigs, but minimum space allowance and bedding required for indoor environments. Feedlots permitted with better than conventional standards. Standards extend to breeding animals, transport and slaughter. Compliance verified by auditors. Represent a significant improvement over conventional standards. [CertifiedHumane.org](https://www.certifiedhumane.org)



Six-step rating program for animals raised for meat and eggs—not milk. No requirement to move up steps. Step 1: Cages and crates prohibited. Animals can be kept fully indoors or on feedlots with a minimum space allowance. Step 2: Indoor environmental enrichment required. Step 3: Outdoor access required but not pasture. Step 4: Access to pasture required. Step 5: Feedlots prohibited. Step 5+: Animals must spend entire lives on one farm. Off-site transport prohibited. Hormones and subtherapeutic antibiotics prohibited at all steps. Standards extend to transport but not breeding animals or slaughter. Compliance verified by auditors. **The ASPCA recommends Steps 2 and above, which represent a significant improvement over conventional standards. When a product shows the basic GAP label without a number, look for separate language on the package identifying the product's step level.* [CertifiedGAP.org](https://www.certifiedgap.org)



Ruminants (cows, sheep and goats) have continuous access to pasture and a diet of 100% forage (no feedlots). Cage confinement, hormones and subtherapeutic (preventative or growth-promoting) antibiotics prohibited. Standards do not extend to breeding animals, transport or slaughter. Compliance verified by auditors. [AmericanGrassfed.org](https://www.americangrassfed.org)



Access to outdoors not required for birds, beef cattle or pigs. More space required than in conventional farms but less than other animal welfare certifications. Cages with enrichment for egg-laying hens permitted. Standards extend to breeding animals, transport and slaughter. Compliance verified by auditors. [HumaneHeartland.org](https://www.humaneheartland.org)



Outdoor access required but size, duration and quality not defined and widely variable. Cage confinement and hormones prohibited. Antibiotics prohibited beyond first day of life. Minimum indoor space, handling, transport, and slaughter not addressed. Compliance verified by auditors. [USDA.gov](https://www.usda.gov)

LOOSELY DEFINED LABELS

The following claims found on packages are loosely defined, unregulated or even misleading.



CAGE-FREE

Cages prohibited but hens can be raised in enclosed, windowless sheds. Note: Chickens and turkeys raised for meat (as opposed to for eggs) are not typically caged, rendering the label meaningless on those products.



FREE-RANGE

Producers must demonstrate that animals have "access to the outdoors" but size, quality and duration of access to that outdoor space is unregulated, so conditions vary greatly.



GRASS-FED

Pasture access during most of growth required, but feedlots allowed in final months. Antibiotics and hormones allowed.



HORMONE CLAIMS

Hormone use in milk- and meat-producing cattle to increase production and weight is associated with welfare problems. *"No hormones added"* or *"no hormones administered"* claims are allowed if producers prove no hormones were used during animal's life. *"Hormone-free"* claims are not approved by USDA since all animals produce hormones naturally. Hormones are prohibited for use on chickens, turkeys and pigs so this label is meaningless on products from those species.



ANTIBIOTIC CLAIMS

Routine use of "subtherapeutic" antibiotics for disease prevention or growth is associated with confined, unhealthy conditions. Lack of antibiotic use can indicate a healthier overall environment but is not a guarantee of better welfare. *"Antibiotic-free"* claim not allowed because antibiotic residue testing technology can't verify animal never received antibiotics. *"No antibiotics administered," "no antibiotics added"* and *"raised without antibiotics"* claims allowed by USDA if producers prove antibiotics were not added/administered at any point.



Natural

As defined by USDA, this term only refers to how meat is processed after slaughter, not how an animal was raised.



Other unregulated or undefined terms

that do not necessarily impact farm animal welfare

Humanely Raised, Humanely Handled, Naturally Raised, Vegetarian-Fed