
Delivering on the Promise of Safe and Healthy Foods

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Perhaps the quest for the fountain of youth is an impossible dream. Nevertheless, a longer life, a healthier life, is achievable for many. We know more about what foods are good for us, what medicines are beneficial, and what lifestyle changes may ensure that we at least have a chance to live to be octogenarians or even into our nineties. But how do consumers learn how to have that longer life, healthier life—do they know the magic formula to avoid diabetes, stroke, cardiovascular disease?

We are told to eat the right foods, see a physician regularly, exercise, and not to smoke, drink, or take drugs. We know that we should eat fruits and vegetables and consume plenty of fiber, read every label, and know exactly what foods are good and what are bad. We are even told what states and cities to live in for cleaner air and better water quality and to decrease the likelihood of having an auto accident or being the victim of a crime.

INCREASING CONCERNS OVER FOOD SAFETY

But even following all the right rules, there is no promise of good health. Let's consider, for example, food safety. Although safe food is an important public-health priority for the nation, an estimated 76 million illnesses, 324,000 hospitalizations, and over 5,000 deaths are attributable to contaminated food in the United States each year. For some consumers, foodborne illness results only in mild, temporary discomfort. For others, especially preschool-age children and the elderly, these illnesses may have serious and/or long-term consequences, and can be life-threatening. The risks are of increasing concern due to changes in the global market, aging of our population, increasing numbers of immunocompromised and immunosuppressed individuals, and changes in food-production practices. These illnesses can strike anyone, as those who have lost a family members to *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 or *Listeria monocytogenes* poisoning will attest.

From the consumer's perspective, choices have to be made every day, with or without adequate, reliable information. In fact, sometimes choices are made using misinformation or incomplete information, with the potential for misguided thinking. Consumers often have to weigh risks, both voluntary and involuntary—the former are always more acceptable—and often have to rely on someone else's opinion. Ultimately, the consumer may ask, "Am I in control of the decisions I am making? Am I willing to live with the consequences, no matter what?"

How do consumers make choices, if food might be unsafe? Whom can you trust? The government? Isn't the government supposed to make sure our food is safe? Industry? Don't they want to make sure that we return to that restaurant or grocery store? How can they sell unsafe food? How much of what you see on TV or read in the newspaper should you believe? And what about the latest newsletter from your favorite consumer group?

Earning and keeping public trust is a major challenge facing the government, industry, and consumer groups. In the last decade Americans have changed both as citizens and as consumers. We have become a "harder sell," and trust must now be earned, not taken for granted. In the complex reality of science-based approaches using technology to make our food safer, consumers hear one thing from industry, another from some consumer groups, and often confusing, contradictory messages from government.

Whether you are a businesswoman from San José, a construction worker from Arkansas, whether you work for a major restaurant chain or a small grocery store, whether you are a senior citizen from Buffalo or a consumer advocate from Washington, how you make decisions for yourself and family is dictated to a great extent by prior knowledge and experience of the world. In short, attitudes and perspectives are shaped by interests, knowledge of what foods are safe, and by professional expertise. For most consumers, friends, family, colleagues at work, and acquaintances at church or synagogue most influence their attitudes and knowledge—be it fact or fiction—about everyday products and services, and about safety and harm from food.

NATIONAL CONSUMERS LEAGUE AND IRRADIATION

One of the goals of the National Consumers League (NCL) and other consumer groups is to reduce foodborne illness. We have encouraged government and industry to adopt policies and practices that will reduce bacterial contamination of food products. The FDA has approved irradiation as safe and effective in reducing pathogen contamination in meat, poultry, and other food products. And the majority of consumer groups—there are exceptions—accept that irradiation is a useful tool and can contribute to reducing foodborne illness. We emphasize, however, that a tool like irradiation must never replace sanitary practices in the processing of food.

The NCL and other consumer organizations support clear labeling of

irradiated foods. However, we believe that irradiated foods should not be labeled with terms such as “cold pasteurization” or “electronic pasteurization”—terms that mean nothing to consumers. And it would be a mistake and serve to confuse and mislead the public if “treated with radiation” or “treated by irradiation” were not used on the label. Conspicuous, easy-to-read labeling is the only way for the consumer to make an informed choice about irradiated products. Numerous studies have demonstrated strong support for such labeling. In 1999, the Center for Science in the Public Interest and AARP conducted a nationally representative survey of over 1,000 consumers to examine attitudes toward irradiation labeling, and found overwhelming support (89%). They wanted information placed on the front of the package (59%) and were opposed to language such as “cold pasteurized” (91%).

A recent survey of consumers in the aftermath of irradiation use to decontaminate mail in November, 2001, indicated a 50% support for irradiation of all food. And Food Marketing Institute studies demonstrated that consumers accept irradiation if they are properly informed about it. Upon provision of science-based information, willingness to buy increased from 50% to 90%.

Disclosing whether a food product has been irradiated also satisfies another generally accepted principle: the consumers’ right to know. That right was recognized by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its Guidelines for Consumer Protection, which are intended to provide consumer access to adequate information to enable informed choices according to individual wishes and needs. The UN guidelines were inspired by President John F. Kennedy’s pronouncement in his landmark message to Congress in March 1962, that consumers have a right to be given the facts they need to make informed choices as well as a right to be protected against fraudulent, deceitful or grossly misleading information in advertising, labeling, and other practices.

Labeling serves the needs of at least two important groups of consumers. It imparts valuable information to those who would seek out irradiated products for people at increased risk of developing foodborne illnesses—children or nursing-home residents, for example—or because they generally desire for themselves or their families foods that have an extra measure of safety added during processing. At the same time, clear labeling reaches those who wish to avoid irradiated products, because they prefer fresh, or minimally processed foods or because they are concerned about potential environmental and worker-safety problems, or find irradiated foods unappealing for any other reason.

WHAT IS NATURAL?

In all avenues whereby consumers obtain information—labeling, advertising, patient inserts, information on Web sites, on the radio or TV, the daily newspaper or favorite magazine—whether choosing a food, an over-the-counter drug, or a dietary supplement, one word is commonly used to make the product more attractive: “natural.”

The NCL commissioned a national random-sample survey to find out how Americans understand the claim of “natural” or “plant-derived” on various products, including drugs, dietary supplements, personal-care products, cosmetics, and food items. The League also commissioned four focus groups, composed of women over age 45, to explore their views of products labeled “natural” or “plant-derived,” as an extension of past NCL research on women and dietary supplements.

That “natural” products come from nature is a commonly held belief that may be imparting a false sense of security. While aging baby boomers have a desire to stay young and healthy through the use of “natural” or “plant-derived” products, they must understand that just because a product is labeled or advertised as “natural” does *not* guarantee that it is safe or harmless for consumers or safer than similar products not bearing the “natural” label. The Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, and the US Department of Agriculture, which regulate drugs, food, and personal-care products and advertising, have been warning consumers that “natural” is not synonymous with safe. But studies by the NCL show that the message is not resonating. While over 75% of those surveyed believe that when they buy “natural” they are buying products that are unprocessed, pure, and gentle, those products can be powerful and have serious side effects. When consumers compared a product labeled “natural” with a similar product not labeled thus, 74% believed the former was safer, 76% believed it had fewer and less-serious side effects, and 70% believed it was less likely to cause interactions with other medications.

The NCL survey revealed that the majority of the participants (64%) were very or somewhat confident that the claim of “natural” accurately describes the ingredients and processes for that product. Many consumers are turning to “natural” products to improve their health. Eighty percent of those surveyed believed that “natural” products were “good for me,” and nearly 70% believed that the “natural” product was something their body needs; and if they use it, their overall health will improve. As one participant of the focus group stated, “I tend to idealize ‘natural’ products.”

There is a strong assumption that products labeled or advertised as “natural” are, indeed, natural. Three quarters of consumers polled expected at least 90% of the ingredients in “natural”-labeled products to be natural. Yet, studies show that this is often not the case. In a random sample of herbal stores, the California Department of Human Services found that nearly a third of “natural” remedies contained either heavy metals (such as lead, arsenic, and mercury) or undeclared pharmaceuticals. Products containing unsafe levels of heavy metals or prescription drugs could be disastrous to unsuspecting consumers purchasing a “natural” product.

Just because something is on the shelf at the grocery store or drug store does not render it harmless. When taking drugs and dietary supplements, consumers

must always be cautious of interactions with foods and medications and possible side effects, even if the product is labeled “natural.” And while consumers may think that when they buy “natural” they are buying unprocessed, pure and gentle products, “natural” products can be quite potent and pharmacologically active, resulting in serious side effects.

FEDERAL REGULATION OF “NATURAL”

For consumers to understand what the “natural” label says about a drug, dietary supplement, personal-care product, or food item, they need to understand how the government regulates the claim of “natural.” The government agencies regulating the labeling and advertising of drugs, dietary supplements, personal care products, and food have not issued much guidance on the use of “natural” on labels and in advertising. Because there is a lack of consensus on what the term actually means for a product, there has been little regulation on its use.

Focus groups unanimously agree that there is a need for greater regulation of the word “natural” in marketing and advertising. Specifically there is interest in the classification and standardization of the definition of “natural,” and enforcement of standards regarding the contents and degree of processing of “natural” products.

For meat and poultry, the USDA allows the use of the term “natural” only if the product contains no artificial ingredients, coloring ingredients, or chemical preservatives, and the product and its ingredients are only minimally processed. Even though a meat or poultry product bears the “natural” label, the animal itself may have been raised using antibiotics or growth stimulants since the label does not cover animal-production practices.

For other food products, the FDA regulates the use of “natural flavoring” on food labels. For a food in which the only flavor is a natural flavor, it may be labeled accordingly, *e.g.* “natural strawberry flavor.”

Many food items are now labeled “organic” which is not the same as “natural” While “natural” is not defined by the FDA for food products, the USDA has published a final rule for the production, handling, and processing of organically grown agricultural products: “organic” entails the integration of cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.

The FDA does not specifically define or regulate the use of the claim “natural” or “plant-derived” for prescription or over-the-counter drugs. Generally, drug-product labels or advertising cannot make false or misleading statements. The FDA, which regulates the claims made on dietary supplement labels, does not define or standardize the use of the word “natural” although it prohibits labeling that is false or misleading. The Federal Trade Commission, which has jurisdiction over the advertising of dietary supplement products, will take action against false, deceptive, unsubstantiated, or misleading advertising.

The FDA does not define or regulate the use of the word “natural” on personal-care or cosmetic products.

CAVEAT EMPTOR

As consumers navigate the marketplace of “natural” and other products for their health and try to decide what is best, they should not assume that their first instinct is always best. They should remember that not all things natural are safe:

- Understand the label. Talk with your healthcare provider. Check with your physician or pharmacist about all medications and dietary supplements you are taking.
- Be aware of possible interactions between dietary supplements and foods and drugs, prescription or over-the-counter.
- Be a savvy consumer. Ask yourself if the claim is just advertising or hype. Is there an explanation of the ingredients/origins of the product?
- Compare similar products. Are the ingredients/processes the same or different?
- Check ingredient lists carefully. Are there any ingredients that may be harmful? If you are unsure, check with a health professional.
- Read and follow product instructions carefully.
- Research products before you use them.