

ROOST ROSTER

A glossary of chicken meat and food label terminology

The U.S. Department of Agriculture regulates and oversees the language on meat and poultry labels. Here are some terms commonly found on chicken packaging.

All-Vegetable or Vegetarian Diet

Most poultry feed is made from corn and soybean meal, but sometimes also contains meat and poultry by-products, which are excellent sources of healthy vitamins, minerals and proteins. If the feed does not contain any of these products, it can be labeled "All-Vegetable Diet" or "Veggie Fed."



Farm-Raised

All chickens raised in the U.S. for meat are farm-raised, in spacious barns equipped with temperature controls, clean feeding and water systems, and protection from any predators or external elements that could affect the health of the chickens.



Organic

Products carrying the "USDA Certified Organic" seal (regulated by USDA) mean the chicken has been fed only certified organic feed (corn and soybeans). The chicken is also free-range and has not been given antibiotics — though it may have been vaccinated against common diseases. Most of the processing practices are the same for chickens raised organically and conventionally. The Organic food label does not indicate that the product's safety, quality or nutritional attributes are any higher than the conventionally raised product.

Antibiotics Claims

All chicken you buy is technically "antibiotic free" — federal rules state that if any antibiotics are required, they must have cleared the birds' systems before they can leave the farm. Some chickens are raised without the use of antibiotics. In the store, these chicken packages may be labeled a number of different ways, including "No Antibiotics Ever," "Raised Without Antibiotics" or similar terms.

Free-Range

Generally, "free-range" is included on a label when the chicken has access to the outdoors. Not all free-range chicken is organic, but all organic chicken is free-range.

Fresh

"Fresh" means the temperature of whole poultry and cuts have never fallen below 26°F (the temperature at which poultry freezes, unlike water).



Pasture-Raised

Chickens that are primarily raised outdoors on pasture.



Cage Free

Broilers are raised in large, open barns. So all chicken you buy from a store is raised cage-free, whether it's labeled "cage free" or not.

Broiler

A young chicken raised for meat.



Hatched, Raised and Processed in the USA

More than 99% of chicken sold in the U.S. comes from chickens hatched, raised and processed in the U.S. The only exception is a very small amount imported from Chile and Canada — which have food safety and quality standards equal to our own.

Retained Water

A "retained water" statement, such as "May contain up to 6% retained water" or "Less than 4% retained water," is often found on packages of fresh poultry. USDA does not allow retention of moisture in meat and poultry, except for any moisture resulting from essential safety procedures, such as chilling processed chickens in ice-cold water to keep them cool and slow the growth of any spoilage bacteria. If any moisture is retained by the chicken after these steps, it must be stated on the label.

Cornish Hen

A small broiler chicken harvested at a young age. It is not a game bird (which is a bird hunted for sport or food).

Natural

Under USDA regulations, a "natural" product has no artificial ingredients, coloring ingredients, or chemical preservatives, and is minimally processed.



Roaster

A larger chicken of 5.5 lbs. or more and less than 12 weeks of age.



Dark Meat

The back half of the chicken: the legs (drumsticks) and thighs.



No Added Hormones or Steroids

Despite this label appearing on many chicken products found in the store, no chicken you buy is ever given added hormones or steroids. In fact, the use of such added or artificial hormones is forbidden by law by the FDA and this must be noted on the label.

USDA Processed Verified

Companies with approved USDA Process Verified Programs are able to make marketing claims associated with their process verified points such as age, source, feeding practices, or other raising and processing claims and market themselves as "USDA Process Verified." Process Verified means that a company has been evaluated and verified by the USDA in these areas.

Enhanced

A chicken product has been "enhanced" if it contains an added marinade or ingredients for flavor, which typically include water, salt, sugar, chicken broth or seasonings, like garlic. If a product is enhanced, it must clearly say so on the front of the package, along with a list of every ingredient and how much of it was used.

White Meat

The breast, tender and wing of the chicken.

