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IS THERE TRUTH IN FOOD PACKAGING?

Many times, food marketing and trendy terminology can lead to consumer confusion. For National Nutrition Month, the Okaloosa County Health Department and the American Dietetic Association offer help in navigating grocery aisles to learn which food phrases can help you make healthier choices—and which terms won't make much of a difference to your diet.

"Consumers want to make healthier choices, but it can be difficult to figure out which foods are best," says registered dietitian and ADA spokesperson Melinda Johnson.

The ADA lists some recent food marketing terms and deciphers their meanings:

Natural - According to the Mintel Global New Products Database, "natural" claims were the most common on food and beverage launches in 2008. What does natural mean? Neither the Food and Drug Administration nor the U.S. Department of Agriculture has formally defined it. The FDA holds to its 1993 policy: *[FDA] has not objected to the use of the term on food labels provided it is used in a manner that is truthful and not misleading and the product does not contain added color, artificial flavors or synthetic substances. Use of the term "natural" is not permitted in a product's ingredient list, with the exception of the phrase "natural flavorings."*

Processed and unprocessed - "These terms are frequently misunderstood," Johnson says. Many people think of *processed* as unhealthy packaged foods with empty calories and loads of additives, and *unprocessed* as foods that are not canned, frozen or packaged. Neither of these beliefs is entirely correct. According to a 2008 federal law, "processed" refers to food that has undergone a "change of character." Examples: raw nuts (unprocessed) vs. roasted nuts (processed); edamame (unprocessed) vs. tofu (processed); a head of spinach (unprocessed) vs. cut, pre-washed spinach (processed).

Local - "The local food movement refers to buying food that is grown close to where you live," says Johnson. This movement is connected to a broader philosophy of environmental sustainability and supporting the local economy.

Whole - "There is no regulatory definition of whole foods," says Johnson, "but it's a term consumers hear often." *Whole foods* generally refer to foods that are not processed or refined and do not have any added ingredients. By most definitions, whole foods include fresh produce, dairy, whole grains, meat and fish; meaning any food that appears in its most pure form with minimal processing.

Organic - Of all these terms, *organic* has the most specific criteria and legal meaning. As defined by the USDA, organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic plant foods are produced without using most conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering or ionizing radiation. A government-approved certifier must inspect the farm to ensure these standards are met. In addition to organic farming, there are USDA standards for organic handling and processing. There are three levels of organic claims for food:

- **100-percent Organic.** Products that are completely organic or made of only organic ingredients qualify for this claim and a USDA Organic seal.
- **Organic.** Products in which at least 95% of its ingredients are organic qualify for this claim and a USDA Organic seal.
- **Made with Organic Ingredients.** These are food products in which at least 70% of ingredients are certified organic. The USDA organic seal cannot be used but "made with organic ingredients" may appear on its packaging.

"It's important to know what terms mean and to know what to look for when you're trying to make positive changes to your diet," says Johnson. Visit www.eatright.org or www.HealthyOkaloosa.com for more tips on healthy eating habits.

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