

What Does It Mean?

Don't believe everything you read on an egg carton. Some claims mean something, while others don't.

Here are some common claims...and some claims that we wish were more common.

Certified Claims

These claims have been verified or certified. You can trust them.



USDA Organic: Hens must be uncaged inside barns or warehouses, and must have outdoor access (how much isn't specified). Hens must be fed an organic, all-vegetarian diet that is free of antibiotics and pesticides. Beak cutting is permitted. (Egg producers often trim hens' beaks to prevent the animals from harming each other.) Hens cannot have received any antibiotics after they were three days old.



American Humane Certified: Hens can be confined in cages or can be cage-free. Beak cutting is allowed.



Animal Welfare Approved: Hens are raised by independent family farmers in flocks of no more than 500 birds that spend their adult lives outside. Beak cutting is prohibited. The animals aren't fed any animal byproducts. (The eggs are available at some farmers markets and restaurants.)



Certified Humane: Hens must be uncaged inside barns or warehouses, but may be kept indoors at all times. Beak cutting is allowed.



United Egg Producers Certified: Meets minimum voluntary industry standards, which,

according to the Humane Society, "permit routine cruel and inhumane factory farm practices."

Uncertified Claims

If the eggs haven't been certified by an organic or animal-welfare organization, these claims haven't been verified and are as honest as the companies that make them.

Raised without Antibiotics: The hens were not fed antibiotics at any time. If a hen was sick and given antibiotics, its eggs cannot make the claim. The routine use of antibiotics in hens is illegal.

Cage-Free: Hens live outside of battery cages in barns or warehouses, but usually don't have access to the outdoors. Cage-free hens typically have two to three times more space than caged hens.

Free-Range or Free-Roaming: Cage-free hens with some outdoor access. There are no requirements for how much or what kind.

Pasture-Raised or Pastured: Hens spend at least some time outside foraging for vegetation and bugs.

Claims that Mean Nothing

You can safely ignore these claims.

Hormone-Free: Claim or no claim, it's illegal for egg producers to feed hormones to their hens.

Natural: It can mean anything.

Nutrient Claims

Caged and cage-free hens typically eat the same corn-based diet, so there's no nutritional difference between their eggs. But some producers supplement their hens' diets with ingredients that raise the level of some nutrients.

Two large Eggland's Best eggs, for example, contain 50 percent of the Daily Value for vitamin E. That's 10 times as much as two regular large eggs contain. If an egg carton makes a claim, check the Nutrition Facts label to see what percent of a day's worth of the nutrient the eggs supply.



Omega-3 Claims

"Not all omega-3 eggs are created equal," warns Mary Van Elswyk, a

dietitian and omega-3 consultant in Longmont, Colorado. "You need to know which omega-3s you're interested in and how much of them the eggs contain."

DHA and **EPA** help reduce the risk of heart attacks, lower blood triglyceride levels, and are key constituents of brain cells and the retina. They're found most plentifully in fatty fish like salmon. A 3½ oz. serving of cooked salmon contains roughly 1,200 milligrams of DHA and 600 mg of EPA.

The third omega-3 fat—**ALA**—doesn't protect the heart as much as DHA and EPA do. Most Americans get enough ALA from margarine, salad dressing, and other foods made with vegetable oils.

A typical egg naturally contains about 25 mg of DHA and 25 mg of ALA. So if a carton claims that its eggs have omega-3s but doesn't say how much, or if it boasts that it has 50 mg of omega-3s per egg, "chances are, it's actually just an ordinary egg," says Van Elswyk.

Last summer, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee said that eating seafood twice a week that provides an average of 250 mg a day of DHA plus EPA is associated with a lower risk of fatal heart attacks in people with or without heart disease. The committee also concluded that there isn't enough evidence that ALA can do the same.

A few companies feed their hens fish-meal or algae, which can get the DHA up to about 100 mg per yolk. By feeding their hens flaxseed or canola oil, they can easily boost the ALA to 350 mg or so. So if a carton boasts that its eggs have 300 mg or more of omega-3s, you can assume that most of it is ALA and not the more desirable DHA and EPA.

The FDA has banned all omega-3 claims on eggs, but that hasn't stopped producers from making the claims. 🍳

Sources: Humane Society, others.