

Deciphering POULTRY LABELS

If you've shopped for chicken or eggs you may have noticed various descriptions on the labels, such as "all natural", "organic", "vegetarian fed", "cage free", "free range", "certified humane" and so on. What do these mean to us?

It is very good to know what these labels mean to ensure you are choosing the highest quality of poultry for yourself and your family. Before you set out to get more eggs or chicken, read this article so you know what to look for and exactly what you're purchasing.

The label "Natural" means there are no artificial ingredients added to the chicken that would alter it to make it unnatural. It does **not** mean it is organically raised.

The label "Organic" means that the feed the chickens were fed was organic (and non-GMO) and containing no pesticides. The standards for indoor space are the same as for cage free, except each bird must also be allowed 2 square feet per bird of outdoor space to stretch their wings.

The label "Vegetarian Fed" simply means they were fed only grains and not ground up animal by-products. It does not mean the grains were organic or non-GMO.

The label "Cage Free" leads one to think the chickens are free to roam about a large outdoor area and scratch the grass, etc. However, "cage free" only means that instead of the chickens being raised in battery cages, which are about the size of an 8½"X11" sheet of paper per chicken, they are raised in an enclosure that is a minimum of 1 to 1½ square feet per bird. They could be in a larger enclosure, but most business minded farmers do not offer that luxury since it is not legally required for the "cage free" label.

The label "Free Range" is quite misleading as well. Legally, the chickens have to have access to the outdoors. This access may only be for 5 minutes per day, and there is little or no regulation as to the amount of space per chicken that is provid-

ed in the outdoors. It may only be 1 square foot or less per chicken, but as long as they are allowed access to the outside of the building for any length of time each day, they can be labeled "free range". The "certified" standards require free range chickens to have a minimum of 2 square feet of outdoor space per bird to roam in. Free range chickens can also get their beaks trimmed just as the other chickens in smaller cages.

"Pasture Raised" hens must have 108 square feet of outdoor space to roam in for each chicken.

The label "Certified Humane Raised and Handled" indicates the chickens are raised in a more natural environment. They are raised outdoors with the ability to roam and scratch in the grass, and can make nests for the egg-laying. The certified humane raised and handled label also means that cage free chickens get 1.5 square feet per hen, litter for dust bathing, perches for the birds, and ammonia levels kept at or below 10ppm, which means the scent is imperceptible.

Aside from the "Pasture Raised" and "Certified Humane Raised and Handled" chickens, the conditions of all other types of factory farm raised chickens can be quite disturbing, so I won't go into details here. Chickens are very loosely regulated. It is good to note that since 1959 it has been illegal for farmers to use hormones on their chickens. As for antibiotics, the chickens are required to be free of antibiotics (out of their system) by the time they go to slaughter. It does not mean they were raised without them. If they were raised without them, that will usually be noted on the label. We just have to hope they are all abiding by the new laws, since regulation can be lacking, and we cannot rely on all labels to be true unless they are "**Certified**".

Depending on where you live, it might be difficult to find the "certified humanely raised and handled" eggs, but it does seem much easier to find the "pasture raised" eggs (also a good choice). ♦