How can companies get away with calling processed foods "natural"?

October 3, 1986

Dear Cecil:

Why is it that the food-processing industry can get away with peddling their products as "natural"? Seems to me nothing that's stuffed into a can, box, bag, or bottle is "natural." Yet walk down the supermarket aisles these days and you'll see all kinds of food products that don't exist in nature labeled "natural," "all natural ingredients," some even "100% natural." They don't call the waxed, artificially ripened fruit and pesticide-soaked vegetables in the produce department "natural." So how can a carton full of white sugar and raspberry paste be called "100% natural"? In fact, there are many so-called "natural" products that include refined sugar. If you've ever visited a sugar mill, you know that the process they use to turn cane into powder is, well, unnatural.

— Dirk W., Tucson, Arizona

Cecil replies:

When the revolution comes, Dirk, there is no question that the heads of the food companies will be put on trial by the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, we must recognize that the current shabby state of affairs owes almost as much to the gullibility and ignorance of consumers, including food zealots such as yourself.

For many years, from both a legal and a nutritional point of view, "natural" was a completely meaningless term. During the Reagan administration the staff of the Federal Trade Commission wanted to issue a rule defining "natural" foods, but the commission nixed the idea. As a result, according to ex-FTC chairman James Miller, the terms "natural" and "organic" could probably be applied to Coca-Cola.

Now, admittedly, this was a hard-core Reaganista talking here, but you can understand his reasoning. Horrifying though the thought may be to health food buffs, there is no
way that even refined white sugar, AKA sucrose (C12H22O11), can be considered an "unnatural" product, strictly speaking. Sucrose is found in many plants, including cane, beets, and maples. It is removed by a relatively simple mechanical process that does not chemically alter the final product, and it is not doped up with additives. This is not to say it's good for you, but that's a different story.

Even if we were to accept an extreme definition of "natural"—e.g., not subjected to any process invented since 1812—the word still doesn't tell you anything especially useful. Many "natural" substitutes for common consumer products—honey for sugar, sea salt for ordinary salt, carob candies for chocolate—are essentially equivalent to the foods they're supposed to replace. Furthermore, there are many naturally-occurring substances, such as the cyanide precursors found in some fruit pits, that are dangerous. The fact that something is "natural" doesn't necessarily mean it's healthful.

It's true, of course, that if you eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, you'll be better off than if your diet consists solely of TV dinners. That's because processed foods tend to heavy up on the fat, sugar, and salt. You'll also be eating a lot fewer food additives—although, except for occasional wrong numbers like sulfites, certain uses of which have been banned by the FDA, additives are not the major health threat facing Americans. The real dietary problem these days is the consumption of too much fat and cholesterol, which are found in both processed and "natural" foods, such as milk and eggs.

All that having been said, the government finally did establish minimal definitions for some terms, including "natural." But I venture to say a lot of folks won't find them entirely satisfactory. Here's a rundown:

"Natural," "all natural." Contains no synthetic or artificial ingredients, although there's no restriction on sugar. "Natural" meat or poultry is free of artificial additives and subjected to only minimal processing. "Natural" meat may still contain drug residues, though.

"Light" food generally must have a third fewer calories or half the fat of the non-light version. Labeling-wise this is definitely an improvement. For a long time light could simply mean that the product was (tee-hee) light in color or texture. But there are still some big loopholes. Products that traditionally have been known as light, e.g., light cream, are exempt, meaning that veggies prepared in a "light cream sauce" aren't necessarily low-fat or low-cal. Certain terms such as "lightly sweetened" aren't regulated
"Healthy" food has a max of (1) three grams of fat, (2) 480 milligrams of sodium, and (3) 60 milligrams of cholesterol per serving. It also has to provide at least 10% of the FDA's recommended daily amount of one of the following: vitamins A or C, calcium, iron, protein, or fiber. But there can still be sugar or chemicals.

"Fat-free" means pretty much what it sounds like---the product contains only trivial amounts of fat (less than 0.5 grams per serving). But fat-free products can still contain a lot of calories.

Bottom line: catchy words like "natural," "light," etc., may or may not mean something, but you'd still better read the fine print.

— Cecil Adams