

Misleading Food Labeling

THE ISSUE:

When Americans see labels like “heart healthy” stamped on a box in the grocery store, they assume that a trustworthy scientific body has developed criteria and applied them to the food inside. Americans take this to mean that they are making a healthy choice, especially for those with heart conditions. Unfortunately, this is wrong.

The word “healthy” is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and a new standard went into effect on [April 28, 2025](#), updating the definition to emphasize food groups such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nuts, while setting limits on added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium.

- This shift moves away from the previous narrow focus on individual nutrients (for example, low-fat or high-vitamin content) toward a more holistic approach aligned with current nutrition science and federal dietary guidelines.
- Yet compliance with this new rule isn't required until [February 25, 2028](#).

Currently, manufacturers do not have to justify the use of the “heart-healthy” claim at all. While the FDA regulates some specific health claims on food labels, vague terms like “heart healthy” and “nutritious” slip through as unregulated marketing language.

Consumers need to be aware of what labels mean—and don't mean—so they can make informed choices.

THE CONCERNS:

Heart-healthy labels offer the promise of better nutrition but often lead shoppers—particularly busy families—to foods that do not fulfill that promise entirely.

- In fact, [2020 research](#) shows that front-of-package nutrition labels like “heart healthy” steer consumers toward products containing ingredients that may increase health risks.
- For example, a product might be labeled “heart-healthy” by a manufacturer due to its fiber content, yet still contain high levels of added sugars or sodium, thereby negating many of its purported benefits.

[This study](#) suggests that consumers may rely on these claims without examining the complete nutritional information, influenced by the nearly \$14 billion spent annually on marketing food and beverages. For a product to be truly heart-friendly, it must be judged based on the complete nutritional profile—not solely on select, highlighted ingredients.

[A review](#) of 60 studies across 11 countries looked at what happens when shoppers buy products labeled as “healthy” or “heart-friendly.” It found that these shoppers:

- Ate about 7% fewer calories.
- Took in about 11% less total fat.
- Saw almost no change in sodium, fiber, or protein.
- Did not eat more fruit, whole grains, or other heart-protective foods despite the labels.

THE RISKS:

Misleading “heart-healthy” and other claims about nutrition have the potential to steer consumers toward dietary choices that contribute to chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

- Products that tout these claims may conceal high levels of sodium or sugar—ingredients associated with elevated blood pressure and obesity.
- The implications extend beyond individual health, posing challenges to healthcare systems as the prevalence of diet-related illnesses increases.

When consumers make decisions based on incomplete or deceptive nutritional information, the long-term consequences can be significant. It is also important to remember that what is good for one person's heart may be entirely different for another. Beyond personal health, widespread mislabeling can lead to increased healthcare burdens and a higher rate of chronic disease within our communities

SOLUTIONS:

While a label may catch your eye, it is important to look beyond the front-of-package claims. Detailed nutrition information and ingredient lists tell the full story, which can often reveal that a supposedly “heart-healthy” product may not be as healthy as it first appears.

Being your own label detective can help you stay on track:

- **Review the serving size**—which is sometimes smaller than expected—and adjust your interpretation of the nutrition numbers accordingly;
- **Monitor calories**, as even a heart-healthy product might be a calorie bomb if laden with sugars or additives; and
- **Examine the nutritional breakdown closely**, prioritizing high-fiber, low-sodium options while avoiding excessive saturated fats, and be sure to read the full ingredients list.

If you're ever in doubt, the wisest plan is to eat more fresh fruits, veggies, nuts, and beans, and cut back on high sugar and highly processed foods. Fruits and veggies don't come with labels, but they're nature's original heart health MVPs.

The FDA's updated definition of “healthy” will go into effect in February 2028 and should make it easier to spot truly heart-friendly options.

- Until then, though, it's up to you to be your own label detective.
- The FDA should consider clarifying the use of other terms like “heart healthy” and “nutritious” so they are better understood by consumers and not used to mislead.

On the policy front, regulators could additionally experiment with incentives to encourage manufacturers to opt for healthier recipes

and formulations—for instance, offering tax breaks if a product meets rigorous whole-food standards like high fiber and low sodium.

- These incentives would not only drive industry innovation but also push companies toward creating recipes that align more closely with genuine health.
- To prevent shoppers from being duped without disrupting their access to food, the FDA could launch a pilot program in select regions to test the new stricter rules on heart-healthy claims, tracking how these changes impact buying patterns and product formulations.

SOURCES:

[A Meta-Analysis of Food Labeling Effects on Consumer Diet Behaviors and Industry Practices | American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#)

[Updated Healthy Claim & What It Means For You Factsheet | FDA](#)

[How to Read Food Labels Without Being Tricked | Healthline](#)

[Nutrition, Food Labeling, and Critical Foods | FDA](#)

[13 Misleading Food Label Claims and How Not to Be Tricked | Sentient Media](#)

[Food Packaging Claims | American Heart Association](#)

[The Nutrition Source | Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#)

[Food and Nutrition Information Center | USDA](#)