



Understanding Egg Labels



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Are you feeling overwhelmed by the numerous choices available in the egg aisle at the supermarket? Today, you can choose between brown and white, free-range and cage-free, organic and non-organic eggs. Read on to unscramble the differences.

Brown vs. White Eggs

The color of the eggshell relates to the breed of chicken. Chickens with white feathers and white earlobes typically lay white eggs. In contrast, brown eggs are laid by birds with reddish-brown feathers and red earlobes. Did you know that there are even chickens that lay shells that are blue and speckled?

Though they tend to cost more, the nutrition you get from eggs with brown shells is the same as that provided by eggs with white shells.

Free-range vs. Cage-free

Free-range and cage-free refer to the type of housing provided to the chickens who laid the eggs. These two terms have specific definitions developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA):

- Free-range eggs come from birds that are allowed to roam freely both indoors and outdoors during the egg-laying cycle. The chickens must be allowed to live as naturally as possible.
- Cage-free eggs are produced by hens who also roam freely but these birds typically live in chicken houses. The houses allow the birds space to move both vertically and horizontally.

Pasture-raised is another term that you may see on egg cartons. This term does not have a legal meaning. Producers who advertise pasture-raised eggs say that the chickens who lay these eggs spend most of their time roaming free in the pasture. However, it is not a regulated term.

Organic vs. Non-organic

Requirements developed by the USDA determine if eggs can be labeled as organic. The guidelines require that organic eggs come from chickens that have been fed foods free of pesticides, herbicides and commercial fertilizers. The hens must also be given access to the outdoors year-round.

Guidelines requiring that birds who lay organic eggs not be given hormones or antibiotics are misleading, because these substances are not commonly added to chicken feed.

Three-Digit Number vs. P-Four Digit Number

The USDA also has rules that producers must follow regarding the numbers that are included on the side of egg cartons, if they choose to participate in the grading and certification process and display the USDA grademark (shield):

- Lot numbers tell you the day of the year that the eggs were packed in the carton. The numbers start with January 1 of each year (001) and run through December 31 (365).
- Facility or plant numbers are a code assigned by the USDA for the place where the eggs were packed. This code consists of a P followed by four digits.

Egg producers are not required to put a sell by or use by date on cartons. But, some producers opt to include this information for consumers. After these dates, changes in the quality of the eggs may occur. For example, the yolks may become less round and the white of the egg may become runnier.

Grade A vs. Grade AA vs. Grade B

The grades on eggs are based on USDA quality standards. The grade includes the quality of the shell, as well as the yolk and white of the eggs. Plus, egg processing plants are inspected to ensure the facilities follow proper egg handling procedures. USDA grades each item separately. Inspectors then compare the different grades and award the lowest grade as the overall grade for the egg. Only eggs that are processed in plants or facilities that operate under the supervision of the USDA receive grades. Although, all eggs sold in the US must have at least a B grade.

Eggs with grades of AA or A are better quality eggs. These eggs are more favorable for baking. Grade B eggs are a good choice for making hard-boiled eggs.

The Bottom Line

There are no significant differences in the nutrition found in eggs based on their color or farming method. There is a small difference in nutrients based on the size of the eggs (small, medium, large, extra-large, and jumbo):

- Calories: 50 to 90 calories
- Protein: 6 to 8 grams
- Fat: 3.5 to 6 grams
- Cholesterol: 140 to 235 milligrams
- Sodium: 55 to 90 milligrams

Eggs also contain a small amount of omega-3 fatty acids. Chickens fed foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids lay eggs with a higher amount of omega-3 fatty acids. These eggs are labelled enriched with omega-3 fatty acids.

Eggs contain carbohydrates but only in trace amounts. There are also small amounts of 13 different vitamins and minerals in all eggs. The USDA MyPlate guidelines encourage eating a variety of protein foods and one egg counts as a 1-ounce equivalent in the protein foods group.

Reviewed October 2019 by Barbara Gordon, RDN, LD. Published November 12, 2019. To learn more healthy tips, visit www.eatright.org and consult a registered dietitian nutritionist. Info obtained from www.eatright.org.