



Anatomy of a Meat Product Label

Who establishes the rules about what is required on a meat product label?

In the U.S, labeling of meat and poultry products intended for interstate commerce is closely regulated by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The FSIS has strict rules regarding the content and appearance of meat or poultry product labels. These rules include everything from dating and safe handling instructions to how large a font must be. These strict labeling requirements protect consumers by providing them with the knowledge needed to make informed purchasing decisions.

What is required on a meat product label?

All retail meat or poultry product labels must have 5 features, but can be required to have other facts and statements displayed depending on the type of product. The 5 required features are: 1.) Product Name, 2.) Official Inspection Legend with Establishment Number, 3.) Address Line, 4.) Net Weight or Quantity Statement, and 5.) Ingredient Statement. These requirements are summarized below.

| Feature | Location on Package | What Products |
|---|--|--|
| Product Name | Principal display panel | All Products |
| Inspection Legend (with Establishment Number) | Principal display panel | All Products |
| Address Line | Principal display panel or information panel | All Products |
| Handling Statement | Principal display panel | All Products |
| Net Weight or Quantity Statement | Principal display panel | Products sold at retail, unless net weight is measured at retail |
| Ingredient Statement | Principal display panel or information panel | Products with more than one ingredient |
| Safe Handling Instructions | Principal display panel or information panel | Products that are not ready-to-eat |
| Nutrition Facts Panel | Principal display panel or information panel | Most retail products, some exceptions |

Required Label Features:

1. Product Name – A product name must accurately define the product contained in the package. The FSIS has established and approved definitions for many types of meat and poultry products. If this definition or “a standard of identity¹” does not exist, a common or usual name may be used, such as “Pork Loin”.² If neither a standard of identity nor a common name exists for the product, a descriptive name must be used, such as “Beef and Broccoli in Dough”.

2. Official Inspection Legend and Establishment Number– An official state or federal inspection legend should be displayed prominently on the label. The inspection legend assures consumers that the product has passed state or federal inspection and is fit for consumption. Every state or federally inspected meat or poultry packing and/or processing facility has an assigned establishment unique to their facility. This number allows any interested party to track products back to the facility from which they originated. In the event of a recall, this number can be used as an identifier to aide consumers in determining if their purchases are part of a recall.

3. Address Line – The address line must include the name and the address of the company that prepared the product. Otherwise, the contact information of the distributor or packer of the product should be provided.



4. Net Weight or Quantity – The net weight is presented to provide the consumer with an idea of how much of a product they are purchasing. The actual weight of the product may deviate some from what’s stated on the label due to evaporation of moisture or variability in the weights of packaging materials. But, the deviation, or variation, from the stated weight must be within an approved range.^{3,4}

5. Ingredient Statement – The ingredient statement provides the consumer with the constituents of what the product is made with. The ingredients are listed in order of the amount of the ingredient included in the final product. So if a product is made with 50 pounds of ground pork, 1 pound of salt, and 0.25 pounds of sugar, then the ingredient statement would read as follows: **INGREDIENTS: Pork, salt, sugar.** If any ingredients comprise less than 2% of the finished product, those ingredients are referenced at the end of the ingredient statement with a qualifying statement such as “Contains less than 2% of...”

Often, the ingredient statement will include general terms such as “spices”, “seasonings” or “flavorings.” These are used to protect companies’ proprietary recipes. An ingredient statement must also include an **Allergen Statement** if any allergens were included in the product. There are 8 major allergens: wheat, shellfish, eggs, fish, peanuts, milk, tree nuts, and soy.

Other Label Features:

6. Handling Statement – Products that require specific handling to maintain their safety and wholesomeness must clearly display instructions for doing so. Common handling instructions include “Keep Frozen” or “Keep Refrigerated”³ (9 CFR 317.2(k)).

Nutrition Information – Although a nutrition label doesn’t appear on example label provided, a nutrition label must appear on either the front panel or on a separate label on the package. The USDA requires nutrition labeling on all meat and poultry products intended for sale to consumers except for those raw products that include only one ingredient, such as a pork loin or beef ribeye. Small establishments like university meat laboratories or other small butcher shops may also be exempt from including

nutrition information. Major fresh or frozen cuts of meat and poultry that have just one ingredient, such as chicken breast or sirloin steak, are also required to have nutrition information, either on the packaging label or at the point of sale^{5,6}; however, some minor cuts are exempt. A nutrition label must include Total Calories, Calories from Fat, Total Fat, Saturated Fat, Cholesterol, Sodium, Total Carbohydrate, Dietary Fiber, Sugar, Protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, Calcium, and Iron. The nutrients stated are reported as the amount provided by a serving or a “Reference Amount Customarily Consumed Per Eating Occasion”³ (9 CFR 317.309). Other nutrients may be also be voluntarily specified.

Safe Handling Instructions – Safe handling instructions do not appear on the example label provided because this particular product is fully cooked and classified as “ready-to-eat”. Safe handling and cooking instructions are required for any meat and poultry product that is raw or only partially-cooked, that is the product requires some cooking step on the consumers part. Following the safe handling and cooking instructions can help to prevent food-borne illnesses.

References:

- ¹ Food Standards and Labeling Policy Book. 2005. United States Department of Agriculture-Food Safety and Inspection Service.
- ² Post, R., Budak, C., Canavan, J., Duncan-Harrington, T., Jones B., Jones, S., Murphy-Jenkins, R., Myrick, T., Wheeler, M., White, P., Yoder, L., and Kegley, M. 2007. A Guide to Federal Food Labeling Requirements for Meat, Poultry, and Egg Products. The Labeling and Consumer Protection Staff. Office of Policy, Program, and Employee Development. Food Safety Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Hogan & Hartson, LLP. Washington, DC.
- ³ CFR Title 9: Animals and Animal Products Chapter III Subchapter E – Regulatory Requirements under the federal meat inspection act and the poultry products inspection act Section 412-500.
- ⁴ National Institute of Standards and Technology. Checking the Net Contents of Packaged Goods. NIST Handbook 133 (2013) Appendix A. Table 2-9.
- ⁵ CFR Title 9: Animals and Animal Products Chapter III Subchapter A – Regulatory Requirements under the federal meat inspection act and the poultry products inspection act Section 317.344
- ⁶ CFR Title 9: Animals and Animal Products Chapter III Subchapter E – Regulatory Requirements under the federal meat inspection act and the poultry products inspection act Section 381.444

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