

Why Farmer's Market Eggs are the Best Choice

EGG VOCABULARY

ORGANIC: Eggs certified as organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture come from uncaged birds that have some outdoor access. Their feed is organically raised, and they can't receive antibiotics. These chickens most likely have some (not all) exposure to sunlight.

CAGE-FREE: Means the chickens were uncaged and able to freely roam a barn or other facility, but they generally don't have access to the outdoors.

FREE-RANGE: Indicates the hens are cage-free and have some access to the outdoors, but the type and duration of outdoor access is unclear. It may, for example, entail a screened porch.

ALL NATURAL: Can mean just about anything the egg producer wants. The USDA considers all shell eggs natural and sets no standards for the hens' living conditions and feed.



PASTURE-RAISED: Indicates the hens are raised outdoors on a pasture where they can roam and forage. They are often given the "grass fed" label as well. But the USDA hasn't developed a definition for pasture-raised products.

VEGETARIAN-FED: Means the hens received only vegetarian feed, so no animal byproducts were used. It also indicates the chickens—which naturally are omnivores—were kept indoors and unable to eat grubs, worms or other bugs.

OMEGA-3: Means eggs contain extra omega-3 fatty acids, which studies have shown to improve heart health. The hens that produce them are fed a diet rich in these acids, such as flax and fish oils.

WHITE/BROWN/GREEN/BLUE: Egg color is based on the breed of hen laying the egg and doesn't affect quality or nutrition.

MISLEADING LABELS

According to the law, "**free-range**" doesn't really mean anything. The thing that makes eggs healthy and nutrient-dense is when hens have access to the outdoors, to sunlight, to bugs and green grass. If a label says "free-range," it guarantees none of those things. "Free-range" can simply mean that the hens have "access" to the outside for as little as five minutes a day.

As for the "**cage-free**" label, all that means is that rather than being crammed into cages stacked on top of each other, hens are cage-free. They can still be confined indoors for their entire lives, never seeing a day of sunshine.

"**Organic**" eggs only guarantee that the chicken was fed organic feed and isn't receiving antibiotics. They could still have limited or no access to the outside, and their diet is surely unnatural.

HEALTHY EGGS: WHAT TO BUY

So, faced with these meaningless labels, how can you choose the most nourishing, healthy eggs for your family? Prioritize the purchase of eggs this way:

BEST CHOICE: Pastured eggs from a local farmer. Chickens live their entire lives outdoors, in the pasture, picking through cow dung, eating bugs and grass, basking in the sun. Their feed may or may not be supplemented with anything other than what Mother Nature provides in the field. If it is supplemented, a non-soy feed is best. Pick these up at your local farmer's market.

Remember, when compared to the USDA's nutrient data for conventional eggs coming from chickens confined in factory farms, the eggs of pastured hens usually contain:

- 1/3 less cholesterol
- 1/4 less saturated fat
- 2/3 more vitamin A
- 2 times more omega-3 fatty acids

- 3 times more vitamin E
- 7 times more beta carotene
- 4 to 6 times more vitamin D

SECOND CHOICE: At the supermarket, choose the eggs with the most Omega-3s and DHAs available. Those are the nutrients most commonly lacking in the eggs from "battery hens," and some companies have specially formulated their chicken feed in an attempt to make up for the hen's abnormal and unnatural living conditions.

THIRD CHOICE: Organic eggs. Although they may not be nutritionally superior to your average "battery hen" eggs, you at least know these eggs came from hens raised without the use of antibiotics and that the hens were fed organic feed. So you at least won't have any environmental guilt buying them.