

Understanding Fresh Meat Labels

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Labels provide consumers with a wealth of information about meat and meat products. In addition to identifying a product, labels are used to convey nutritional information, provide thawing, cooking and storage guidelines, and suggest menu ideas. Recent government regulations have standardized the format used to present nutritional composition of all food products, as well as safe handling recommendations on meat and meat products.

In the past, it was estimated that more than 1,000 names were used to identify the approximately 300 fresh cuts of beef, pork, lamb and veal offered for retail sale. Meat cuts were often given different names depending on the region, city or store where the meat was sold. To simplify meat cut identification for consumers, a list of standardized names for retail cuts was developed twenty years ago as part of the Uniform Retail Meat Identity Standards program, also known as URMIS. Since that time, many retailers have voluntarily chosen to employ the URMIS system to label meat cuts.

URMIS uses a three-part identification system. The first part of the label identifies the meat as beef, pork, lamb or veal. The second part names the primal or wholesale cut where the meat comes from on the carcass. Wholesale cuts from beef include the chuck, rib, loin, round, shank, brisket, plate and flank. The name of the retail cut is identified on the third part of the label. This lets you know what part of the wholesale cut you are purchasing. If a retailer is using the URMIS system, the meat name, wholesale cut and retail name must appear on the price-weight label. Familiar or fanciful names may be listed on the label after the recommended URMIS name, or by using a separate sticker. Beef Rib Eye Steak is an example of a meat cut identified using the URMIS system. Fanciful names that may be added to the label include Delmonico Steak, Boneless Rib Eye Steak, Filet Steak, Spencer Steak or Beauty Steak.

The information required on fresh meat labels varies depending on local regulations. In addition to listing the product name, the product weight, price per unit of weight, package cost and packaging date will usually be specified. As of May 27, 1994, all raw and partially cooked ground meat and poultry products must have a safe handling label. This label will be required on all other not-ready-to-eat meat and poultry products after July 6, 1994. The safe handling label provides guidelines to consumers to help minimize the risk of foodborne illness. Many retailers are providing nutritional information about fresh meat using posters or brochures that can be found in the meat sales area of your local store. Labels are useful tools that serve as good sources of information about the meat you purchase.