

Making Some Sense Out Of Ground Beef Labeling

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When consumers go to the grocery store, they are confronted with a variety of items from which to select. One of the most commonly purchased items from the beef section is ground beef. Because of its functionality in a multitude of different entree items, ground beef is the largest single beef item sold (by volume) in most food stores. Although most consumers enjoy having a variety of items to choose from, ground beef is sometimes confusing because of labeling issues still being considered by USDA. Ground round, sirloin or chuck are used by many stores to label their ground beef, others may use the term ground beef and identify the lean-to-fat ratio by stating the percent lean, percent fat, or a combination of both, with others simply use the term hamburger. At this time, all of these labels are acceptable on the appropriate package in a retail store. The challenge for consumers is knowing which product is the right one for the buyer's intended use.

The definition of ground beef is chopped fresh and/or frozen beef from primal cuts and trimmings. The maximum fat content in any ground beef is 30% (70% lean) by law. No water, phosphates, binders, or other meat sources may be added and still be labeled as ground beef. If a ground beef label has an added label identifier such as ground round, sirloin or chuck, the lean and fat used in the product can come from only the primal included in the name. So ground round can only contain lean and fat from the round, sirloin from the sirloin, etc. If a package is labeled simply as hamburger, it has to meet all of the already mentioned requirements with the exception that it may contain fat trimmings from other than the primal sources.

For the past 25 years, consumers have identified and selected ground beef by a "lean descriptor" such as "80% lean". A 1993 nutrition labeling requirement prohibited the use of "%lean" unless the product met the new definition of "lean", which would contain less than 3% fat. Ground beef in most retail outlets contains from the maximum 30% fat down to approximately 5% fat with the majority being 75 to 85% lean. So the "%lean" label most consumers were used to was to be removed. A revision in the regulation was proposed the next year to allow a "%lean/%fat" descriptor on ground beef products.

The revision in the regulation was proposed to eliminate confusion by consumers. If a "%lean/%fat" descriptor was not used, it was concluded that most ground beef would revert to being sold as ground round, sirloin, or chuck, or under an "in-store" name. Although on the surface this doesn't seem to pose a significant problem, the composition of these products without a descriptor of some type may vary greatly. Many shoppers would rank ground round being the leanest grind a store would stock, followed by ground sirloin and then ground chuck. However, as long as ground round has at a minimum of 70% lean and maximum 30% fat and comes from the round, then it is correctly labeled. It could also have 90% lean and 10% fat and still be

labeled as ground round. This clearly was not the intention of the 1993 nutritional labeling regulations or the type of information that most consumers request. In consumer studies conducted in 1994, shoppers were not able to accurately identify the lean content of ground beef identified only by names such as ground round. However, when the “%lean” and/or “%lean/%fat” identifiers were used, a majority of shoppers could accurately identify the lean content of ground beef and indicated that a label using a descriptor was preferred when they made ground beef purchase decisions.

Until a final decision is made regarding the labeling of ground beef, consumers will have to continue to make their purchase decisions based on the best knowledge they have available. Some of the recommendations listed will help in matching the appropriate ground beef product with the intended use by the shopper:

1. If available, use the “%lean” or “%lean/%fat” indicator on the label to get the desired lean content.
2. Check to see if a “%lean” or “%lean/%fat” indicator is included on a package labeled as ground round, sirloin or chuck - many stores are now providing both. Remember, although these names do give an indication of where the beef comes from, they do not necessarily indicate the leanness.
3. If nothing else is available, “Look for the red”. A package of ground beef will be redder in color the higher the lean content, so if no other indicator is available, the redder the color, the leaner the ground beef.

A number of consumers make decisions concerning ground beef purchases solely on leanness. Others base their decisions based on leanness and price, balanced by the ultimate intended use. Regardless of your decision criteria, ground beef is an economical source of available nutrients. The total calories, protein, and fat, along with available iron and zinc levels is shown below for a 3oz. broiled serving cooked well done.

	73% Lean	80% Lean	85% Lean
Calories	248.00	235.00	213.00
Protein (g)	22.84	24.38	24.85
Total Fat (g)	16.83	14.52	11.81
Iron (mg)	2.27	2.18	2.37
Zinc (mg)	4.99	5.35	5.51