

Is Organic Food Better?

We know that it's important to eat healthy! At least half of the foods on your plate should be fruits and vegetables, add whole grains, lean protein and fat free or low fat milk. Isn't that enough? Is organic food better?

Many say that organic food is safer, more nutritious and better tasting than conventional foods. But other experts say that there isn't enough evidence to indicate a real advantage to eating organic foods. We do know one thing for sure – organic foods cost more....sometimes much more than the conventional counterpart. Is the additional cost worth it?

What is Organic?

The word "organic" refers to the way farmers grow and process agricultural products, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products and meat. Organic farming practices are defined by strict USDA standards. Farmers who grow organic produce and meat don't use conventional methods to fertilize, control weeds or prevent livestock disease. For example, rather than using chemical pesticides, organic farmers may conduct more sophisticated crop rotations and spread mulch or manure to keep weeds at bay. As there is likely more weed growth and the possibility of more pests, organic plants may produce more natural toxins. These natural toxins may end up producing harm to people as utilizing manure fertilizers creates a concern that organic crops may increase the risk of contamination by bacteria such as E. coli.

Organically raised livestock must be given organic feed and are not given growth hormones and antibiotics. In addition, organic farm animals must have the opportunity to spend time outdoors.

On the top of the next page are a few key differences between conventional farming and organic farming (Figure 1).

Is Organic Food More Nutritious?

There isn't a clear answer to this question. Whether the food is organic or conventional, it is known that the

fresher the item, the greater the nutritional quality. In addition, foods that are fresh taste better! But, the jury is out as to whether organic foods are more nutritious.

Organic or Not? Check the Label

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has established an organic certification program that requires all organic foods to meet strict government standards. These standards regulate how such foods are grown, handled and processed.

Any product labeled as organic must be USDA certified. Only producers who sell less than \$5,000 a year in organic foods are exempt from this certification; however, they're still required to follow the USDA's standards for organic foods.

If a food bears a USDA Organic label, it means it's produced and processed according to the USDA standards. The seal is voluntary, but many organic producers use it.



Products that are completely organic — such as fruits, vegetables, eggs or other single-ingredient foods — are labeled 100 percent organic and can carry the USDA seal. Foods that have more than one ingredient, such as breakfast cereal, can use the USDA organic seal plus the following wording, depending on the number of organic ingredients:

Conventional Farming	Organic Farming
Apply chemical fertilizers to promote plant growth.	Apply natural fertilizers, such as manure or compost, to feed soil and plants.
Spray synthetic insecticides to reduce pests and disease.	Spray pesticides from natural sources; use beneficial insects and birds, mating disruption or traps to reduce
Use synthetic herbicides to manage weeds.	Use environmentally-generated plant-killing compounds; rotate crops, till, hand weed or mulch to manage weeds.
Give animals antibiotics, growth hormones and medications to prevent disease and spur growth.	Give animals organic feed and allow them access to the outdoors. Use preventive measures — such as rotational grazing, a balanced diet and clean housing — to help minimize disease.

Figure 1: Key differences between conventional and organic farming.

- 100 percent organic. To use this phrase, products must be either completely organic or made of all organic ingredients.
- Organic products must be at least 95 percent organic to use this term.
- Products that contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients may say "made with organic ingredients" on the label, but may not use the seal. Foods containing less than 70 percent organic ingredients can't use the seal or the word "organic" on their product labels. They can include the organic items in their ingredient list, however.

Do Organic and Natural Mean the Same Thing?

No, "natural" and "organic" are not interchangeable terms. You may see "natural" and other terms such as "all natural," "free-range" or "hormone-free" on food labels. These descriptions must be truthful, but don't confuse them with the term "organic." Only foods that are grown and processed according to USDA organic standards can be labeled organic.

Is There a Downside to Buying Organic?

One common concern with organic food is cost. Organic foods typically cost more than do their conventional

counterparts. Higher prices are due, in part, to more expensive farming practices.

Because organic fruits and vegetables aren't treated with waxes or preservatives, they may spoil faster. Also, some organic produce may look less than perfect — odd shapes, varying colors or smaller sizes. However, organic foods must meet the same quality and safety standards as those of conventional foods.

Finally... Is Organic Really Better?

Is eating organic food, which costs more, really better? Stanford University doctors dug through lots of research to find an answer -- and concluded there's little evidence that going organic is much healthier, citing only a few differences involving pesticides and antibiotics. Eating organic fruits and vegetables can lower exposure to pesticides, including for children – but the amount measured from conventionally grown produce was within safety limits, the researchers reported.

Perhaps the best advice is to follow a balanced diet. Eat lots of fruits and vegetables, plenty of whole grains, and fat free or low fat dairy products. Enjoy lean proteins; watch the added fat, sugar and salt. Drink plenty of water, get enough rest, and include physical activity in your daily routine.

*Stay warm and healthy,
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