

COOPER Health

The Cooper Clinic Magazine

WINTER 2008

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Organic Foods—Are They

BY JENNIFER NEILY, M.S., R.D., L.D.

With many food products available and the organic industry growing, the organic world is big business. According to the Organic Trade Association, there was a 22 percent increase in sales of organic products from 2005 to 2006, and organics accounted for 3 percent of total retail food and beverage sales. Some surveys show that consumers tend to view organic foods as being superior. But are they? There's no easy answer, but hopefully we can shed some light on the following questions.

What Does *Organic* Mean?

Organic certification by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is a process certification, not a product certification. It does not have to do with the product's quality, nutritional value, or safety. Organic foods differ from conventionally produced foods in the way they are grown, handled, and processed. *Certified organic* means there was no use of synthetic pesticides, hormones, synthetic fertilizers, bioengineering, or irradiation.



Worth It?

Animals are raised on 100 percent organic feed and do not receive antibiotics or growth hormones.

Are Organic Foods More Nutritious?

The jury is still out, and the evidence is just not clear. Some studies have found higher nutrient levels in organic produce, but other studies have found no difference. What is known is that numerous studies touting the health benefits of fruits and vegetables have been done using conventionally grown produce, not organic produce. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fewer than one-third of Americans are getting the recommended five servings or more (at least 4½ cups) of fruits and vegetables per day.

There is no nutritional difference between regular and organic milk. They both contain the same amounts of nine essential nutrients including protein, calcium, and vitamin D. Strict government standards ensure that regular milk is just as safe, pure, and nutritious as organic milk.

Regarding processed foods, the more processed a food is, the more of its original healthy nutrients are missing. Furthermore, an organic product still might contain high amounts of saturated fats, sugar, sodium, and calories. It's important to read labels. Keep in mind that regardless of being labeled organic, if something was junk food before, it is still junk food.

Are Organic Foods Safer?

Despite consumers' belief that organic products are safer, there is limited scientific data to back that up. Regardless of how livestock and poultry are raised, slaughtering methods are the same. That's where the risk for contamination occurs—organic meats and poultry are just as likely to be contaminated with disease-causing bacteria as nonorganic. Organic farms are just as vulnerable to the spread of disease in multiple ways, including through insects, birds, and water.

As the organic industry grows and we rely more on imported products, the concern rises. Not all countries have the same regulatory oversight as the U.S. Another concern is the possible lack of integrity in organically processed foods from other countries.

What About Pesticides?

According to the USDA, pesticides are very rarely found in poultry, beef, milk, and eggs, whether they're organic or not. Testing for pesticide residue on conventionally grown produce was done by the Environmental Working

Group, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group. The accompanying chart identifies the most contaminated (dubbed “the dirty dozen”) and least contaminated. When deciding where to spend your organic dollars, consider spending your money on those foods you eat most often that are on the most contaminated list.

The 12 Most Contaminated (“The Dirty Dozen”)

Peaches
Apples
Bell peppers
Celery
Nectarines
Strawberries
Cherries
Pears
Imported grapes
Spinach
Lettuce
Potatoes

The 12 Least Contaminated (“The Consistently Clean”)

Onions
Avocado
Frozen sweet corn
Pineapples
Mango
Asparagus
Frozen sweet peas
Kiwi
Bananas
Cabbage
Broccoli
Papaya

What Do the Labels Mean?

Fortunately, due to mandated labeling laws by the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) implemented in 2002, there are strict guidelines on organic labeling. Products marketed as organic must meet uniform, consistent standards. Look for the green USDA Organic seal.



- ▶ **100% Organic**—Must contain only organically produced ingredients (excluding water and salt). May use the USDA seal.
- ▶ **Organic**—Must contain at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients (excluding water and salt). May use the USDA seal.
- ▶ **Made with Organic Ingredients**—At least 70 percent of the ingredients must be organically produced. May not use the USDA seal.

Be careful, though, because some words and statements mean very little. For example:

- ▶ **Free-range**—No official definition. It means an animal had access to the outdoors. There is no guarantee that the animal actually went outside.

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Quick Tips on Buying Organic

- ▶ Expect to pay more for organic foods—anywhere from 10 to 100 percent more than conventional foods.
- ▶ If buying organic makes you feel better and you can afford it, do it.
- ▶ Don't feel guilty if organic food doesn't fit into your budget. Focus on feeding your family nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, and low-fat or nonfat dairy.
- ▶ Buy locally and buy seasonally. Explore farmers' markets and support local farmers.
- ▶ Just eat your fruits and veggies! The value of eating more fruits and vegetables—whether organically or conventionally grown—is overwhelming.



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- ▶ **Natural or all-natural**—Also no official definition except in regard to meat and poultry products. The USDA defines natural as not containing any artificial flavoring, colors, chemical preservatives, or synthetic ingredients. But unlike the organic program, there is no independent verification of these claims.
- ▶ **Hormone-free**—Because all animals produce their own hormones, this is an illegal claim.
- ▶ **Farm-raised**—Means little on the label. All poultry, for example, are raised on farms.

Is Organic Food More Environmentally Friendly?

There is no doubt that fewer chemicals are better for the environment. But an organic label does not tell you whether the berries you are buying are from California, China, or Chile. With the growth of the industry, more manufacturers may rely on overseas products. That's a lot of fossil fuel. Would you rather buy organically grown fruit shipped from overseas or cross-country or buy locally produced food even if it's conventionally grown?



What About Fish?

The USDA has not developed organic certification standards for fish. Although a producer may claim their fish is organic, that doesn't mean anything, and they are prohibited from displaying the USDA Organic label.

Meet with Our Dietitians!

Every year, the Cooper Clinic nutrition department's experienced dietitians help thousands of clients improve their diet and enjoy optimal health. For more information or to schedule a nutrition consultation, call **972-560-2655** or visit **www.cooper-clinic.com**.



Jennifer Neily, M.S., R.D., L.D.

Jennifer Neily is a registered and licensed dietitian at Cooper Clinic in Dallas and the 2007–2008 president of the Texas Dietetic Association—an organization of more than 3,800 Texas nutrition professionals.