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Why Should You Eat Organic Foods?

The popularity of organic foods continues to rise. Is eating organic foods healthier? Does it offer more nutrients? These are among the factors people consider when they opt for organic.

What is organic food?

Organic food refers to agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products and meat, which have been grown or raised without the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, chemical weed killers or drugs.

The term “organic” does not refer to the make-up of food, but how it was grown and processed. Organic farmers do not use conventional methods to fertilize, manage weeds or reduce livestock disease. They use more natural methods such as crop rotation, for example, to control weeds.

The Differences between Conventional and Organic Farming

Conventional farmers use chemical fertilizers to promote plant growth whereas organic farmers use natural fertilizers, such as manure or compost, to feed the soil.

To ward off pests and minimize diseases, conventional farmers spray insecticides. Organic farmers, on the other hand, use natural pest killers such as birds and insects that eat other insects, fungus-eating bacteria, soap, plant oils, traps, and mating disruptions to reduce pests and disease.

Conventional farmers use chemical weed killers to manage weeds. Organic farmers rotate crops, hand weed, till or spread mulch or manure to control weeds.

Conventional farmers give their animals antibiotics, growth hormones and medications to avoid disease and stimulate growth. Organic farmers and ranchers do not use any of these methods. They also feed animals with only organic food. They do not use irradiation or x-rays to destroy pests, change how plants grow, or prevent produce from rotting right away.

The “Organic” Label

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) governs the rules on the use of the “organic” label. Products can only bear the USDA Organic label if they were produced and processed according to USDA organic standards and if at least 95% of the food’s ingredients are organically produced. A government-approved certifier inspects the farm to make sure all the rules and standards are met. Those who meet the USDA standards can use the certification seal on their packages.

Products that are completely organic or comprised of all organic ingredients are labeled “100% Organic” and can display the USDA seal. Products that are at least 95% organic are labeled “Organic” and can also display the USDA seal. Products that contain a minimum of 70% organic ingredients may display the wording “Made with organic ingredients” on their package labels. The organic seal, however, cannot be used on these packages.

Other terms such as “natural,” “free-range,” “sustainable,” or “hormone-free” that are found on packages do not mean that a product is organic. The U.S. does not regulate the use of these labels.

Organic Farming is Better for the Environment

Organic farming practices are good for the environment because it conserves soil and water and reduces pollution. Pesticides can harm or kill birds and other small animals. Toxic chemicals may find their way into air and water supply systems.

Cost of Organic Products

Products grown organically typically cost 10 to 40% more than conventional counterparts. The higher cost is due to several factors. Organic farming requires labor-intensive measures to grow plants and animals without the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, chemical weed killers and drugs. Organic cattle ranchers give their animals organic feed, which will cost them twice as much. Most organic farms are much smaller in comparison to conventional food farms and have lower crop yields.

Nutritional Value

A British study found no important differences in nutrient content between organic and conventionally produced foods. Another study conducted by the Oregon-based Organic Center yielded similar results as the British study, but had also found higher levels of polyphenols and antioxidants in organic foods.

There is no conclusive evidence that organic food has better nutrient value than conventional counterparts. The USDA also does not claim that organic products are safer or more nutritious.

An important issue especially for growing children is the pesticide residue often found on conventionally grown foods. Studies have shown that children raised with organic foods have lower levels of toxic chemicals in their bodies than those raised eating conventionally grown foods.

Tips on Buying Organic

Wash fresh produce thoroughly with running water to reduce the dirt and bacteria. Use a small scrub brush for fruits and vegetables in which you eat the outer skin.

Buy fruits and vegetables that are in season for maximum freshness and quality. Ask what day new produce arrives at the grocery store or farmer's market.

According to the Environmental Working Group, the following fruits and vegetables contain the highest levels of pesticide residue when grown on traditional farms:

- Apples
- Bell Peppers
- Lettuce
- Kale
- Celery
- Carrots
- Strawberries
- Blueberries
- Red raspberries
- Cherries
- Peaches
- Pears
- Grapes (imported)
- Nectarines
- Potatoes
- Spinach

Conversely, foods that were found to have the lowest levels of pesticide residue are the following:

- Bananas
- Avocados
- Broccoli
- Cauliflower
- Mangoes
- Kiwi (sweet)
- Pineapples
- Papaya
- Onions

- Peas (sweet)
- Asparagus

If you want to choose all organic foods yet finances sometimes hold you back, you could buy organic versions of only your favorite foods or the foods that contain the highest pesticide residue levels.

Why Eat Organic?

Most people eat organic foods because they want to avoid pesticides and chemicals in their food. Some buy organic food because of their concern for the environment. Some believe that organically raised food tastes better. For whatever reason, consumers who purchase organic food believe it is of such superior quality that it is worth the extra expense.