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The term “organic” refers to the way food crops are grown and processed. Just because the food you eat is labeled organic, it does not automatically mean you’re eating healthy. The evidence from studies is unclear on whether organic is more nutritious than non-organic. Choosing healthful food is still up to you.

Organic Food: NOT Always the Healthy Choice

Organic food is that which is produced without using synthetic or chemically formulated growth stimulants, fertilizers, antibiotics, pesticides, or animal by-products. Sewage sludge-based fertilizer is also a no-no for organic produce. Organic food must be grown in safe soil.

By definition, organic food should not be genetically modified (GM). Organic crops are required to be isolated from GM crops while being grown. In direct contrast to GM seeds are heirloom seeds.

Heirloom Seeds

As opposed to GMO seeds, whose genetic material has been altered in laboratories through non-natural methods, heirloom seeds are untreated and are non-GMO. Heirloom seeds are open-pollinated, which means their plants will grow true to their form. Open-pollination ensures that a particular cultivar can be grown from seed for many generations and will come back true to type.

Heirloom seeds are regarded by gardeners as old-fashioned seeds passed down by generations that “breed true.” The new plant will look just like its parent.

In the case of GMO seeds, they may not be able to germinate and reproduce. They may be sterile. It is the same case with hybrid seeds. If the hybrid seed does sprout, the plant will most likely not have many of the characteristics that the parent plant has. Modified seeds do not have the ability to reproduce themselves faithfully, if at all.

With their original genetic material intact, plants grown from heirloom seeds have stronger flavors and have developed resistance and immunity to certain pests and diseases.

GMO seeds are actually bred for commercial growers to increase production or to resist herbicides. Genetically modified plant foods have raised health concerns due to their unknown effects on human health.

A GMO or genetically modified organism is a plant or animal whose DNA was altered through bioengineering. GMOs are outlawed in most European countries since the European Union's de facto moratorium that started in 1998.

Monsanto

Among the world's leading developers of GMO seeds is the Monsanto Company, which is based in Creve Coeur, Missouri. The company produces genetically manipulated seeds that are able to tolerate its flagship product, Roundup (the world's number one herbicide), and resist pests. Other Monsanto products are Asgrow, Dekalb, Deltapine, De Ruiter, and Seminis seeds.

According to the company's estimates, more than 70 percent of the herbicide-resistant crops in the world come from Monsanto. Around the time when it took over the Delta and Pine Land Company, Monsanto was repositioning itself, from a company that concentrated on agricultural chemicals to a seed and biotechnology company.

In 2000, a caravan consisting of thousands of farmers actually "evicted" Monsanto from the Philippines. They held a protest action at the Monsanto office in Makati, and according to the farmers' statements, the transnational corporation deserved to be evicted from the country, as a pusher of harmful pesticides and GMOs. A simultaneous protest was held in front of Monsanto's General Santos City office in Mindanao. Some farmers and activists in Isabela province even went so far as to create an anti-Monsanto crop circle.

"Organic" label

GMO seeds developed by Monsanto and other companies in the biotechnology market could be raised using organic farming practices, and the resulting food can carry a USDA-approved "organic" label if it is included in a product with organic ingredients. Products labeled organic are required by the US Department of Agriculture to contain 95 to 99 percent organic ingredients. (Salt and water are not included when a particular food is said to be 100% organic.) The remainder of the ingredients, which are not available as organic products, must be approved by the National Organic Program, which is in charge of developing, implementing, and administering the production, handling, and labeling standards for organic food in the United States.

When food packaging has the label "made with organic ingredients," the food is required by the USDA to have 70 to 94 percent organic ingredients, though it is not allowed to use the "USDA organic" seal. Thus, even food that is labeled organic might still involve GMO somehow.

Though a food producer may be certified organic, use of the USDA seal or the NOP labeling standards is voluntary. At a farmers' market, it's a good practice to ask the vendors specific questions about how the food they're selling was grown, how they were cultivated, what soil they were grown on, what types of fertilizers were applied, and so on.

The Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit organization that analyzes pesticide test results, recommends buying the following fruits and vegetables organically grown: apples, bell peppers, carrots, celery, cherries, imported grapes, kale, lettuce, nectarines, peaches, pears, and strawberries. These twelve tend to have the highest pesticide levels when they are farmed using conventional methods.

On the flip side, there are some non-organically grown crops that do not need much pesticide because most of them have thick peel or skin, a natural protection from pests. Plants like these are very hardy and do not require too much maintenance and protection from pests. These are asparagus, avocado, broccoli, cabbage, sweet corn, eggplant, kiwi, mango, onion, papaya, pineapple, sweet pea, sweet potato, tomato, and watermelon.

“Organic” vs. “healthy”

It's wise to remember that not all organic food is healthy. After all, it would be just as easy to manufacture junk food from organic ingredients instead of GMO ones.

Junk food that is labeled as “organic food” is still just that: junk food. Snacks, desserts, and baked goods, even if they are made purely out of organic ingredients, are frequently still quite high in fat, salt, sugar, or calories.

Scientific studies have not been able to establish that organic food is significantly more nutritious than non-organic. Some studies suggest that organic fruits and vegetables contain slightly higher amounts of certain vitamins, trace minerals, and antioxidant phytonutrients than their conventionally grown counterparts. But other studies have been unable to establish significant nutritional differences between organic and non-organic food.

The choice about whether an organic or non-organic food is truly healthful is still up to you. Try to weigh all your options so you can make good decisions about the food you put into your body.