

Organic food. To buy or not to buy?



What is organic food? Organic food is produced without using pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Before a product can be labeled "organic," a Government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make sure the farmer is following all the rules necessary to meet USDA organic standards. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to your local supermarket or restaurant must be certified.

How can I tell organically produced food from conventionally produced food? Look at package labels and watch for signs in the supermarket. Along with the national organic standards, USDA developed strict labeling rules to help consumers know the exact organic content of the food they buy. The *USDA Organic* seal also tells you that a product is at least 95 percent organic. All food products labeled organic must be in compliance with the US organic law. Certification is the public's guarantee that products have been grown and handled according to strict procedures without toxic chemical inputs.

Is organic food better for me and my family? There's no evidence that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food. Organic food differs in the way it is grown, handled, and processed. Some studies show that organically grown foods contain less pesticide residue than conventionally grown ones. Research has linked pesticides to cancer and other diseases. The Environmental Protection Agency considers 60% of all herbicides (weed killers), 90% of all fungicides (mold killers), and 30% of all insecticides (insect killers) as potentially cancer causing. Seventy-three of the most commonly used pesticides have been identified as "probable" or "possible" carcinogens. In addition, pesticides known as organophosphates and carbonates are neurotoxins that can cause nervous system damage.

Is organic worth the extra money? For the most vulnerable groups -- **children and pregnant women** -- going organic whenever possible for fruits and vegetables that carry the heaviest pesticide load makes sense. Children are at a higher risk from pesticides, because they eat more food relative to their body weight and because their nervous systems are still developing. According to the National Research Council, children eat more fresh fruit than adults, which can expose them to multiple pesticides. For organic meat, poultry, eggs, and milk, the direct health benefit is less clear. Certain fruits and vegetables are not worth the premium, however. Organic bananas cost about 2 and half times more than regular bananas. There's almost no health benefit to buying organic in this case. Any pesticide residue is probably discarded along with the peel.

Remember, despite all the things you could worry about, America's food supply is among the safest in the world. And organic or not, it's still important for your children to eat fruits and vegetables.

How do I make the switch and which are the most important foods to buy organic?

Most people don't switch to naturally-grown overnight, but if you want a good place to start, here are some guidelines and lists of foods that are recommended to be bought organically.

The key foods to buy organically grown and/or manufactured from organic ingredients are:

- ❖ Foods that are commonly heavily treated, such as strawberries and grapes.
- ❖ Those where you eat the parts that are sprayed, as in leafy greens or broccoli.
- ❖ Foods you eat frequently, whereby getting higher accumulated exposure over time.

1. **Baby Food.** The very young are extraordinarily susceptible to pesticides.
2. **Strawberries.** This fruit is the most heavily contaminated produce food in the U.S., according to a number of environmental groups. Enjoy them while they are in season from local organic farms or buy frozen organic strawberries from your local whole market.
3. **Rice.** Domestic rice is splattered with mega-doses of pesticides. This is the most frequently consumed food on the planet. Buy organic rice in bulk and store it in an airtight container. It stores very well.
4. **Green and Red Bell Peppers and Tomatoes.** Super sources of Vitamin C, but wrought with pesticides. At certain times of year, the price of organic plum tomatoes is competitive with non-organic varieties. And farmer's markets may be the best source of all for fresh unsprayed tomatoes.
5. **Leafy Greens, such as Lettuces, Spinach, Kale, and Chard.** Sprayed chemicals tend to remain on the leaves of these vegetables, which is potentially more harmful since we eat those leafy parts. Spinach has been found to contain the more potent pesticides, especially the organophosphates (neurotoxins) and permethrin (noted as mildly carcinogenic).
6. **Cruciferous Vegetables (Broccoli, Cabbage, Brussels sprouts, and Cauliflower)**
Excellent foods to eat regularly because of their healthy anti-cancer phytonutrients, vitamin and minerals, high-fiber and low-calories. Since we eat the parts that may have been sprayed, it's best to eat the organically grown versions of these vegetables.
7. **Corn.** Consider that 75- 90% of all domestic corn has been genetically-modified. Most cooking oils include corn oil, and most everything is sweetened with corn syrup. Buying organic corn and corn products, makes more than a little sense. Locally grown fresh corn tends to be treated less.
8. **Green Beans.** Over 60 different pesticides are used on green beans. Even beans used in baby food have been found to be contaminated.
9. **Apples.** A decade after the dangers of Alar were exposed, apples are still soaked in pesticides. Most apples have been found to be nearly as contaminated as strawberries. Forty eight different pesticides were detected by FDA testing in nearly 2500 samples. Nearly half of these 36 were either neurotoxic or carcinogenic chemicals.
10. **Apricots, Peaches and Grapes.** What would summer be without them? One way to keep their pesticide residuals out of your system or minimize them is to use a vegetable rinse,

Parents as Partners: Need to Know News from Parents in Our Community. News by Franca Gioia

such as the one by Healthy Harvest. Many fruits, including grapes, ripen quickly and attract insects and molds. Thus, they tend to be more heavily treated in order to get them to the market. Imported grapes are even more heavily treated than the U.S. grown variety. These are all good reasons to buy organic grapes and grape juices.

11. **Raisins.** Concentrated little grapes, concentrated levels of pesticides.
12. **Cucumbers.** Ever wonder why this delicious crisp vegetable was losing its appeal on your palate? The answer is, once again, pesticides.
13. **Tropical Fruits & Imported Produce** Pineapples, papayas and mangoes are very attractive to tropical pests and may be more heavily treated during cultivation, storage, and shipping. Because of their thin skins, they tend to absorb the sprays. These pesticides cannot be washed away. Out-of-season produce is also heavily treated for easier growing and shipping to the U.S. There is risk of higher toxicity from the use of chemicals that have been banned in the U.S.

Note about Milk Products, Eggs, Wheat and Soy

Milk is a common source of the herbicide atrazine (a known endocrine-disrupter) and the growth hormone BGH which has been genetically engineered to boost milk production. Today's commercial brands are loaded with antibiotics and growth hormones. Look for milk and other dairy from organically-fed cows without the extra rBST, rBGH and antibiotics.

Eggs are a great source of protein, especially if you digest them well and aren't allergic to them. Factory farm eggs also may be lower in nutrients than organic ones, and they don't taste nearly as good as farm fresh eggs from the free-ranging chickens.

Wheat is another staple in the American and world diet. Ninety-one percent of the wheat sampled by the FDA contained pesticide residues! Wheat can be one of the most heavily treated grains, because it is stockpiled as a basic commodity and fumigated periodically to keep down pests. Some forms of so-called wheat allergy, which has been associated with learning problems and difficulty in concentrating, may actually be a neurotoxic reaction to the pesticide residues.

Soybeans. Everything you buy, from bread to cookies to crackers to margarine to dry mixes, has some sort of soy product in it. Most soybeans in the USA are genetically-modified. The jury is still out on whether soy consumption, in general, is beneficial, or whether only fermented soy should be consumed.

Where do I buy organic foods? Request that your local supermarket carry natural and organic foods. Shop at local farm stands for seasonal organic produce. Buy your foods from markets that specialize in organic foods. Some of these markets are Whole Foods, Jimbo's, Henry's, Trader Joe's, CSA programs, farmer's markets, Diamond Organics.Com, Wild Oats and KidsOrganics.Com. When you have no other option but conventionally-grown produce, you may wash off any residual pesticides with Healthy Harvest, a non-ionic fruit and vegetable rinse.

Online Sources:

Article originally published in [E/The Environmental Magazine](#) By Francine Stevens and Betsy Lydon

Adapted from [The Staying Healthy Shopper's Guide: Feed Your Family Safely](#) by Elson Haas, M.D. copyright © 1997

Modified from: [The Green Guide, a newsletter published by Mothers and Others.](#)