



This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts



IS ORGANIC FOOD WORTH IT?

April 2007

Several readers have written in recently asking how to make a case for organic food to skeptical friends and family members. As Pam Fagan of Greenwood, South Carolina, put it:

"I try to encourage people to buy organic foods when they are available. One excuse I often hear is that they cost more and 'I can't spend a penny more for groceries.' I also hear 'What I do is not going to make enough difference to matter.' I was also told by one person that their spouse read that everything that was labeled 'organic' was not necessarily so. Is that true and, if so, how does a person know if something really is organically grown?"

These seem like such common objections, I thought I'd create a FAQ to address them, along with related questions:

1) How can you be sure that food labeled "organic" really is organic? Use of the term is regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture. In order to put the word "organic" on a food label, the grower or producer must get the product certified as organic by a USDA-accredited certifier. Those who knowingly label or sell non-organic products as "organic" can be fined up to \$11,000 for each violation.

2) What exactly does "organic" mean? On a food label, "organic" means the food was produced without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, sewage sludge, genetic engineering or irradiation. In the case of animal products, it additionally means the animal received no antibiotics or hormones and was fed organic feed containing no animal by-products. An organic label also means animals had access to the outdoors, though "access" is not defined in a meaningful way, which makes this the weakest provision of the regulations.

3) Are some foods with an "organic" label more organic than others? Yes, among processed foods with multiple ingredients, those displaying the USDA organic seal -- and/or called "organic" on the front label -- have the most organic content: at least 95 percent. Those labeled "made with organic ingredients" on the front may be as little as 70 percent organic. (The latter cannot display the USDA's organic seal, but may display the logo of the certifying agent.)

4) Is organic food better for the environment? Yes. By eliminating massive quantities of toxic pesticides and synthetic fertilizers used in conventional farming, organic methods help protect the health of our air, water and soil. Another benefit of organic food is that it does not add to the problem of antibiotic resistance -- which makes antibiotics ineffective for treating illness -- because antibiotic use in organically-raised animals is not allowed.



Sheryl Eisenberg, a long-time advisor to NRDC, posts a new This Green Life every month. Sheryl makes her home in Tribeca (NYC), where—along with her children, Sophie and Gabby, and husband, Peter—she tries to put her environmental principles into practice. No fooling.

Beware "Supermarket Pastoral" -- a phrase coined by Michael Pollan in his fascinating book, [Omnivore's Dilemma](#), to describe the beguiling narratives of storybook farms found on many food labels nowadays. Unfortunately, these stories and pictures are often pure fantasy. A number of private groups have stepped into the breach, with a variety of eco-labels. Visit [eco-labels.org](#) for a guide to the best.



The USDA Organic seal guarantees that at least 95 percent of the food's ingredients are organic.

5) Is organic food safer for you to eat? Yes. Unlike conventionally produced food, organic food exposes you to no synthetic pesticides or growth hormones. Many of these substances have been proven to cause cancer, birth defects and damage to the nervous and reproductive systems in animal studies, though at higher levels than commonly found in food. What has not been studied is whether exposure to low levels of these substances, individually or in combination -- as happens in the real world as distinct from the lab -- also has adverse health effects. In the absence of this information, the safest course is not to expose yourself to chemicals designed and proven to kill other forms of life. This is especially true for children, as their developing nervous and endocrine systems put them at much greater risk of harm than adults.

6) Is organic food worth the extra cost? Yes, in the sense that you really do get extra value in the form of safer food that's better for the environment. But you still might not be able to afford a diet of it. If so, try picking and choosing your organic purchases. A study by the Environmental Working Group of 43 fruits and vegetables shows that you can reduce your pesticide exposure from produce by almost 90 percent by avoiding the twelve most contaminated fruits and vegetable and eating the least contaminated instead (<http://foodnews.org/walletguide.php>). If you have young children, a high priority might be organic milk.

7) Will your purchases make a difference? Yes. The reason organic food is now the fastest-growing sector of the food industry is that consumers like you have shown they want it by buying it. There is, in fact, no other way to promote organic food than by buying it and encouraging others to do the same.

8) Is organic food always the best choice? Not necessarily. Locally grown conventional food that travels a hundred miles to get to you may be a better choice than organic food grown 1,500 miles away. Why? Because transporting food a short distance causes much less global warming pollution. That local farm is also preserving open space in your area and contributing to your local economy.

Better yet, get food that is both local *and* organic.

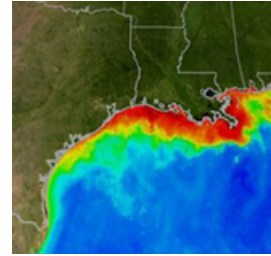
Finally, it's worth noting that when it comes to what is best for the earth and human health, the USDA's organic standards are not the be-all and end-all. Some farmers have their own standards that might allow the occasional use of an antibiotic to treat real illness or a chemical to control a catastrophic pest outbreak (which would prevent organic certification), but actually do much more on a day-to-day basis to cultivate naturally fertile soil, promote biodiversity, provide for animal welfare, keep water supplies safe, protect agricultural workers' health and grow safe, delicious, nutritious food. That is why it is good to patronize farm stands and farmer's markets -- and ask the farmers about how they grow their food.

—Sheryl Eisenberg

Sheryl Eisenberg is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (<http://www.mixitproductions.com>), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- USDA: Consumer Information - <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Consumers/Consumerhome.html>
- NRDC: Organic Food 101 - <http://www.nrdc.org/health/farming/forg101.asp>
- HOW STUFF WORKS: How Organic Food Works - <http://home.howstuffworks.com/organic-food.htm>
- BUSINESS WEEK: Does It Pay to Buy Organic? - http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_36/b3898129_mz070.htm
- ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP: Shopping Guide - <http://foodnews.org/walletguide.php>
- ORGANIC CONSUMERS ASSOC.: More Health Benefits - <http://www.organicconsumers.org/organic/polyphenolics031203.cfm>
- LOCAL HARVEST: Local Food Directory - <http://www.localharvest.org>



Organic farms reduce use of polluting chemicals.

Fertilizers and livestock waste are a primary cause of the vast dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, where nothing but algae can live.



Another reason organic beef is safer: Organically raised cattle cannot be fed animal by-products, the source of mad cow disease.

Room for improvement.

Organic standards are good -- but not nearly as good as they could be. For instance, they permit factory farming on only somewhat better terms than conventional farms use. There is still too much crowding on these farms, as well as too much waste, which is bad both for the animals' welfare and the health of the environment.

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