

Organic Foods: What You Need To Know

Grocery Shopping

The choices you make at the grocery store can help keep you healthy. It's important to choose a variety of healthful foods. This includes colorful fruits and vegetables, low-fat or fat-free dairy, lean proteins and whole grains.

But what about organic? When you're comparing an organic apple to a conventionally grown (nonorganic) apple, which should you choose?

Organic: What does it mean?

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), organic foods are:

- from animals that were not given antibiotics or growth hormones
- grown naturally (not genetically modified)
- grown without the use of unapproved pesticides (chemicals) or fertilizers. Some natural pesticides and fertilizers have been approved for use on organic foods. Insects may also be used to protect crops from weeds and other insects.

What does the organic seal mean?

A food must be certified organic to have the USDA organic seal and the following claims on the label:

- "100 percent organic"
- "organic."



A food must be certified organic to have the USDA organic seal on its label.

If a food label says a food is "made with organic ingredients," it cannot use the USDA organic seal. **It is also important to remember that "natural" does not mean organic.**

Are organic foods a better option?

Although organic foods use fewer pesticides, antibiotics and growth hormones, studies have not shown they are a more healthful option than nonorganic foods.

Until more research is done, you can do the following food safety measures to organic and nonorganic foods:

- Wash fruits and vegetables under running water before eating.

(over)

- Refrigerate food quickly. Cold temperatures keep most harmful bacteria from multiplying.
- Keep raw meat, poultry and seafood separate from other items in your shopping cart and refrigerator, and away from produce when cooking.
- Cook all foods well and use a clean thermometer to ensure proper temperatures.
- Cook foods to the following temperatures:
 - Chicken and turkey: 165 F
 - Ground meats: 160 F
 - Eggs: 160 F
(or until yolks and whites are firm)
 - Beef, pork, veal and lamb: 145 F
 - Ham (uncooked): 145 F
 - Ham (fully cooked): 140 F
- Wash your hands before, during and after handling foods.

How do you decide whether to buy organic foods?

Consider the following when deciding between organic and nonorganic foods:

- **price:**
Compare the price of organic and nonorganic foods. If the difference isn't much, you may consider paying a bit more for the organic. Sometimes organic foods are on sale for the same price as nonorganic foods.

- **type of food:**
Pesticides are sprayed on the outside of fruits and vegetables, covering the outer skin or peel. If you're concerned about pesticides, you may want to consider buying organic fruits and vegetables with edible skins (apples, grapes, cucumbers) and nonorganic fruits and vegetables with skins you'll throw away (bananas, pineapples, sweet corn).
- **what's in season:**
If you can find in-season produce at farmer's markets, skip the grocery store for these items. Many farmers sell locally grown foods that are organic even though they're not labeled certified organic. (Many local farmers do not want to pay the high dues to have their small farms certified organic.)
- **your budget:**
If you can afford buying all organic foods, you'll avoid the risk of eating foods that may contain pesticides, antibiotics and/or growth hormones. Otherwise, you can decide which foods are most important to you to buy organic.

A Note About Sweets, Snacks and Other Processed Foods

Sweets, snacks and other processed foods can also be made with organic ingredients. **Remember that organic does not mean more healthful.**

An organic cookie is still a cookie — it has the same amount of calories, fat and sugar as a cookie made with nonorganic ingredients.