

# Organic foods: Are they safer or more nutritious?



It seems a bit confusing these days when you go to the supermarket and you see the term “organic.” What does that mean, are these foods safer or more nutritious?

The conventionally grown foods cost less and are a proven family favorite. But the organic foods have a label that says "USDA Organic." Does that mean they are better, safer or more nutritious? Several differences between organic and non-organic foods exist. Become a better informed consumer for your next trip to the supermarket.

## Conventional vs. Organic Farming



The word "organic" refers to the way farmers grow and process agricultural products, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products and meat. Organic farming practices are designed to encourage soil and water conservation and reduce pollution. Farmers who grow organic produce and meat don't use conventional methods to fertilize, control weeds or prevent livestock disease. For example, rather than using chemical weed killers, organic farmers conduct sophisticated crop rotations and spread mulch or manure to keep weeds at bay.

**Here are other differences between conventional farming and organic farming:**

Conventional farmers	Organic farmers
Apply chemical fertilizers to promote plant growth.	Apply natural fertilizers, such as manure or compost, to feed soil and plants.
Spray insecticides to reduce pests and disease.	Use beneficial insects and birds, mating disruption or traps to reduce pests and disease.
Use chemical herbicides to manage weeds.	Rotate crops, till, hand weed or mulch to manage weeds.
Give animals antibiotics, growth hormones and medications to prevent disease and spur growth.	Give animals organic feed and allow them access to the outdoors. Use preventive measures — such as rotational grazing, a balanced diet and clean housing — to help minimize disease.

## Organic or not? Check the label

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has established an organic certification program that requires all organic foods to meet strict government standards. These standards regulate how such foods are grown, handled and processed. Any farmer or food manufacturer who labels and sells a product as organic must be USDA certified as meeting these standards. Only producers who sell less than \$5,000 a year in organic foods are exempt from this certification.



Products certified 95 percent or more organic display this USDA sticker.

If a food bears a USDA Organic label, it means it's produced and processed according to the USDA standards and that at least 95 percent of the food's ingredients are organically produced. The seal is voluntary, but many organic producers use it.

Products that are completely organic — such as fruits, vegetables, eggs or other single-ingredient foods — are labeled 100 percent organic and can carry a small USDA seal. Foods that have more than one ingredient, such as breakfast cereal, can use the USDA organic seal or the following wording on their package labels, depending on the number of organic ingredients:

- **100 percent organic.** Products that are completely organic or made of all organic ingredients.
- **Organic.** Products that are at least 95 percent organic.
- **Made with organic ingredients.** These are products that contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients. The organic seal can't be used on these packages.

Foods containing less than 70 percent organic ingredients can't use the organic seal or the word "organic" on their product label. They can include the organic items in their ingredient list, however.

You may see other terms on food labels, such as "all-natural," "free-range" or "hormone-free." These descriptions may be important to you, but don't confuse them with the term

"organic." Only those foods that are grown and processed according to USDA organic standards can be labeled organic.

## Buying tips

Whether you're already a fan of organic foods or you just want to shop wisely and handle your food safely, consider these tips:

- **Buy fruits and vegetables in season to ensure the highest quality.** Also, try to buy your produce the day it's delivered to market to ensure that you're buying the freshest food possible. Ask your grocer what day new produce arrives.
- **Read food labels carefully.** Just because a product says it's organic or contains organic ingredients doesn't necessarily mean it's a healthier alternative. Some organic products may still be high in sugar, salt, fat or calories.
- **Don't confuse natural foods with organic foods.** Only those products with the "USDA Organic" label have met USDA standards.
- **Wash all fresh fruits and vegetables thoroughly with running water to reduce the amount of dirt and bacteria.** If appropriate, use a small scrub brush — for example, before eating apples, potatoes, cucumbers or other produce in which you eat the outer skin.
- **If you're concerned about pesticides, peel your fruits and vegetables and trim outer leaves of leafy vegetables in addition to washing them thoroughly.** Keep in mind that peeling your fruits and vegetables may also reduce the amount of nutrients and fiber. Some pesticide residue also collects in fat, so remove fat from meat and the skin from poultry and fish.

### Reference

Mayo Clinic Staff (2006). Organic Foods are they Safer? Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.com/print/organic-food/NU00255/METHOD=print>