



# Is Organic

By Julia Tolliver Maranan

# Food Better?

Organic advocates claim that organic produce is more nutritious and tastes better than conventionally grown varieties, and that pesticide and synthetic fertilizer residues on conventionally grown food can cause a host of health problems. But organic items typically cost more than their conventional counterparts—sometimes quite a bit more. Are the health benefits significant enough that you should spend the time, effort, and money to buy all organic all the time?

First, let's define organic. In 2002, the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) created national standards that said organic food must be produced without using most

conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering, or ionizing radiation.

The issue of nutrition is not so clear-cut, unfortunately. The NOP has not judged organic foods safer or more nutritious than conventionally grown foods and simply acknowledges that organic producers grow, handle, and process the foods differently. However, a few small studies indicate that "organic" may translate to "more nutritious." A 2001 review of 41 studies found that organic fruits, vegetables, and grains contain, on average, 27 percent more vitamin C, 21.1 percent more iron, 29.3 percent more magnesium, and 13.6 percent more

phosphorus than their conventionally grown counterparts. Another study in *Science Daily Magazine* in 2002 reported that organic oranges contained up to 30 percent more vitamin C than conventionally grown oranges twice their size. These small studies are a good start, but researchers need to conduct larger well-designed studies before experts can say for sure whether organic food is more nutritious.

Taste is hard to measure, although proponents of organic foods argue that fruits and vegetables grown without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers have more flavor because they grow in healthier, nutrient-rich soil. And in a small study published in *Acta Horticulturae* in 2000, subjects rated organic Golden Delicious apples 15 percent tastier than conventional apples.

But the real benefit of going organic may lie in avoiding potentially harmful pesticides. In fact, a report from the U.S. General Accounting Office states, “Exposure to pesticides can cause a range of ill effects in humans, from relatively mild effects such as headaches, fatigue, and nausea, to more serious effects such as cancer and neurological disorders.” With some foods, like

bananas, most pesticide residue gets thrown away with the peel. But other foods, including some you might not expect, can have significant residues. A Consumer’s Union report based on information from the USDA Pesticide Data Program notes that grapes, apples, cantaloupe, fresh peaches, green beans, pears, spinach, strawberries, and winter squash contain the highest levels of pesticide residue. If you or your children eat these foods frequently, you might want to consider buying organic. At the very least, wash the produce thoroughly before you eat it.

The take away: While the jury’s still out on whether organic fruits and vegetables are more nutritious and delicious than their conventionally grown counterparts, it might be worth it to spring for organic versions of your favorite produce to avoid the pesticide residues (especially if your favorites fall on the most heavily contaminated list). An added bonus—buying organic helps protect the environment as well because fewer harmful chemicals will make it into the land, water supply, and air. ■

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## *The Organic Label*

You may have seen this label on some of your favorite foods at the grocery store. But what exactly does it mean? The USDA’s National Organic Program created three ratings for organic foods. Products labeled “100 percent organic” must contain only organically produced ingredients. Products labeled “organic” must contain at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients. Products that meet either of those standards may display the USDA Organic seal. And finally, products that contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients can use the phrase “made with organic ingredients.” Bottom line: if you see the seal, the food is at least 95% organic.

