

What you need to know about organic foods

Once found only in health food stores, organic food is now a common feature at most grocery stores. The word “organic” refers to the way farmers grow and process fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products and meat. Organic farming practices are designed to encourage soil and water conservation and reduce pollution. Since these practices tend to be expensive, organic foods typically cost more than conventionally (non-organic) produced food.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has established an organic certification program that requires all organic foods to meet strict government standards, which regulate how such foods are grown, handled and processed.

- **100% Organic** – To use this phrase, products must be either completely organic or made of all organic ingredients.
- **Organic** – Products must be at least 95% organic to use this term.
- **At least 70% Organic** – May state “made with organic ingredients” on the label but may not use the USDA seal.
- **Less than 70% Organic** – Can’t use the USDA seal or word “organic” on their labels; however, they can include organic items in their ingredient list.

Researchers have concluded that organically and non-organic foods are not significantly different in their nutrient content. Still, people may choose organic foods for the following reasons:

- **Pesticides** – Organic farmers use insect traps, disease-resistant crops and predator insects instead of control crop-damaging pesticides.
- **Food Additives** – Organic regulations ban or severely restrict the use of food additives and fortifying agents commonly used in nonorganic foods, including preservatives, artificial sweetener and colorings.
- **Environment** – Organic farming practices are designed to benefit the environment by reducing pollution, conserving water and soil quality.

Whether you and/or your family only eat organic foods or opt to mix conventional and organic foods, be sure to keep these tips in mind:

- **Select a variety of foods from a variety of sources.** This will give you a better mix of nutrients and reduce your likelihood of exposure to a single pesticide.
- **Buy fruits and vegetables in season when possible.** To get the freshest produce, ask your grocer what day new produce arrives or buy from your local farmers market when in season.
- **Read food labels carefully.** Just because a food product says it’s organic doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a healthier alternative. Some organic products can be high in sugar, salt, fat or calories.
- **Wash and scrub fresh fruits and vegetables thoroughly under running water.** It’s important to always remove dirt, bacteria and traces of chemicals from the surface of fruits and vegetables.