

Fact Sheet

Organic Food and Cancer

Oncology Nutrition

a dietetic practice group of the



Academy of Nutrition
and Dietetics

You're at the grocery store and see two of all types of produce. There's either 'conventional' or 'organic'. You've seen claims that you should only eat organic food. Others say it doesn't matter. How do you decide if it's worth it to spend the extra money on organic?

Are Organic Foods Better for Your Health?

Conventional refers to produce that may be grown with the application of pesticides as part of the farming process. When it comes to health benefits, there have not been any direct studies on humans to show that organic foods can prevent cancer or other diseases, any more effectively than conventionally grown foods. So far, there is also no consistent evidence that organic food is any more nutritious (higher in vitamins, minerals and other nutrients) than conventionally grown foods.

Given this information, why would someone choose organic?

We know that organic foods have:

- Lower pesticide residues
- Lower amounts of synthetic (man made) food additives
- Better stewardship of natural resources like land and water.
- Better stewardship of human resources means being socially considerate of the working and living condition of laborers, needs of rural communities and health of consumers.



Organic Food Facts

Here is a good comparison of conventional vs. organic foods that the Mayo Clinic put together.

Conventional	Organic
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 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.

The US government monitors the organic label. It can be an expensive process for the farmer's to go through in order to be able to make the organic claim. Therefore, many smaller farms that you find in your area may not be able to afford the official organic claim. If you shop at farmer's markets or coop where you can talk to the farmer, they can tell you if they use organic farm practices.

The Most Contaminated Foods

The Environmental Working Group has put together a very practical approach to buying organic. If you are trying to avoid pesticides in your food, purchasing the produce listed under the “Dirty Dozen” in organic form will help you get the most bang for your food buying buck. The “Clean 15” are the lowest in pesticide residues, so the difference between organic and conventional versions of these foods isn’t as great. You may be more comfortable buying the “Clean 15” as conventional.

Dirty Dozen (Buy These Organic)	Clean 15 (Lowest in Pesticides)
Apples	Onions
Celery	Corn
Strawberries	Pineapples
Peaches	Avocado
Spinach	Asparagus
Nectarines (imported)	Sweet Peas
Grapes (imported)	Mangoes
Sweet bell peppers	Eggplant
Potatoes	Cantaloupe (domestic)
Blueberries (domestic)	Kiwi
Lettuce	Cabbage
Kale/Collard greens	Watermelon
	Sweet Potatoes
	Grapefruit
	Mushrooms

Who's your farmer?

Local Food

Another option for your fresh fruits and vegetables is to buy local. This option can be just as important for environmental and health choices as organic foods. Local foods tend to be higher in nutrients because they are usually picked fresh and sold to you soon after picking.

This is different from the food at the grocery store which may be picked before it's ripe so that it can make the long trip to the distribution center and then on to your grocery store.

Another benefit to buying local food at a farmer's market or direct from the farmer is that it is often cheaper than buying it at the grocery store – whether organic or conventional! Find a location for your local foods at www.localharvest.org.

References:

www.mayoclinic.com/health/organic-food/NU00255

www.foodnews.org (from the Environmental Working Group)

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