



Ontario Home Economics Association

Ask a Professional Home Economist

For Immediate Release

Organic Food - Weighing the Debate

By Erin MacGregor, RD, P.H.Ec.

It has never been more confusing to shop for groceries. Consumers are faced with endless decisions when it comes to choosing their food. With the popularity of the green movement, many households are trying to make nutritious and environmentally-conscious choices, while keeping the grocery bill in check.

Demand for organic foods has exploded - as has the debate. The trend has created a big industry. To-day, the marketplace is saturated with organic products at premium prices often leaving consumers guessing.

The following answers to common questions may help consumers make informed decisions about organics.

What does 'organic' mean, and how is it regulated?

In 2009, the Canadian government implemented regulations for organic certification in Canada. Under these regulations any food product labeled organic must be cultivated or raised without chemical pesticides, antibiotics, synthetic hormones, genetic engineering, excessive processing, artificial ingredients or preservatives. Any food product carrying the Canada Organic label, or imported as an organic product must receive certification from an accredited certifying body. Only products with organic content that is greater than or equal to 95% may be labelled 'Organic' or bear the organic logo which is used to help shoppers more easily find certified organic products in stores.



Why eat organic?

People choose to eat organic foods for a variety of reasons. Supporting environmentally friendly farming practices and keeping potentially dangerous chemicals off the dinner plate are the two most common reasons. Animal welfare, better flavour and taking control of one's diet are other motives. The health benefits of consuming organic food are continually debated.

Is organic produce more nutritious?

From a nutritional standpoint, conventionally grown produce and organic produce have not been shown to be significantly different. Both are rich in vitamins and minerals due largely to freshness and the quality of the soil in which they are grown. For overall health, the bottom line is that a diet rich in fruits and vegetables outweighs the risks of pesticide exposure. Consumers should strive to meet their daily recommended servings of a variety of fruits and vegetables first, and make organic choices when possible.

Why does organic food cost more?

Compared to conventionally grown food, the production of organic food is often more labour intensive as farmers control pests and weeds without chemical pesticides which can also result in lower yields.

Should I buy local or organic?

One reason people choose organic food is to reduce the environmental impact of their purchase. Organic foods found in supermarkets often travel from thousands of kilometers away. The environmental cost of their transportation may be offsetting consumers' efforts to stay green. Local Canadian farmers recognize the demand for organics and many are converting to more sustainable farming practices. We can encourage sustainable practice, by supporting local producers. Choose local foods first and organics, if possible.

Are some foods more important to choose organic?

Some fruits and vegetables have been found to have higher levels of pesticide residue than others. There is still uncertainty around the level of residue that can negatively impact health. Some experts believe there are theoretical grounds for concern, particularly among women of reproductive age.

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) a non-profit US research organization produces a shopping guide that lists conventionally grown produce with the most pesticide residue as 'The Dirty Dozen'. It also reports produce with the least pesticide residue as 'The Clean Fifteen'. EWG research indicates that consumers can lower their ingestion of pesticide residue by 80% by choosing conventionally produced food from the clean list. The resource is a handy tool to help consumers decide where to splurge on organic produce. For example, 'The Dirty Dozen' includes: celery, peaches, apples, blueberries, nectarines, bell peppers, spinach, cherries, kale/collards, potatoes and imported grapes. Visit www.foodnews.org to get the complete guide. The level of pesticide residue on produce may vary due to its country of origin. Meanwhile, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency helps to maintain Canada's excellent reputation for safe and high-quality food and to protect Canadians from preventable health risks.

Should I eat organic meat and poultry?

Organic meat and poultry must be raised without antibiotics, synthetic hormones, genetic engineering, chemical pesticides, artificial ingredients or preservatives. Be aware of products marketed as 'all natural', 'free-run', 'hormone-free' or 'antibiotic-free' which may not be certified or meet organic standards.

Should I buy organic milk?

Whether organic or not, all milk sold in Canada is free of antibiotics, hormones and preservatives by law. Unlike the United States, the use of artificial growth hormones to increase lactation is illegal in Canada. While antibiotic use is permitted, any cow receiving antibiotics is taken out of the production system for a period of time deemed appropriate by veterinarians. Milk is tested regularly and extensively to ensure it is free of antibiotics. Choosing organic milk will ensure that the cows are fed certified organic feed.

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Ontario Home Economics Association (OHEA) a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life. **For further information, please contact:** Ontario Home Economics Association, 1 Totten Place, Woodstock, ON N4S 8G7 Tel/Fax: 519-290-1843 Email: nancyohea@rogers.com Website: www.ohea.on.ca