

Are 'Organic' Foods Worth the Money?

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We're constantly being told how we can eat healthier—consume smaller portions, avoid genetically modified organisms, only buy organic foods! On that last one: Much as we'd love to do what's best for our bodies, organic foods tend to cost a good deal more than other groceries. And while organic food does offer some benefits, some may be bigger than others. For example, there's been a lot of controversy around a 2012 [study published](#) by the [American College of Physicians](#) that reviewed over 200 studies and determined that organic foods do not have higher vitamin or mineral content than the same foods grown using conventional methods.

However, that's one piece in a much bigger puzzle when it comes to your personal buying habits. It's a sticky topic, but let's start with what exactly it means for a food to be "organic," and then try to help you decide if *you* should buy organic or not.

What is organic, exactly?

Food labels can be confusing. When you see something is marketed as "organic," what does it actually mean? Here's what it means [according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture](#):

USDA certified organic foods are grown and processed according to federal guidelines addressing, among many factors, soil quality, animal raising practices, pest and weed control, and use of additives. Organic producers rely on natural substances and physical, mechanical, or biologically based farming methods to the fullest extent possible.

Put simply, if you see the “USDA Organic” or “Certified Organic” seal on your food, the item must have an ingredients list and the contents should be [95 percent or more certified organic](#) (not counting salt and water), meaning free of synthetic additives like pesticides, chemical fertilizers and dyes, and must not be processed using industrial solvents, irradiation or genetic engineering, [according to the USDA](#). The remaining 5 percent may only be foods or processed with additives [on an approved list](#).

But “Certified Organic” isn’t the only label you’ll see. You may also see [“100% organic,”](#) which means the product that contains 100 percent organic ingredients (excluding salt and water, which are considered natural). According to the USDA, most raw, unprocessed farm products can be designated “100 percent organic,” as can many value-added farm products that have no added ingredients—like grain flours and rolled oats.

But [what about meat](#)? In order to be [labeled as organic](#), the USDA requires that animals are raised in living conditions accommodating their natural behaviors (like the ability to graze on pasture), fed 100 percent organic feed and forage and not administered antibiotics or hormones.

Violations of the USDA’s organic labeling rules can earn companies civil penalties of [up to \\$17,952 per violation](#). If that seems like not a lot of money for a big business, it should: The low penalties and high volume of organic products flooding the markets have led to skepticism that the USDA is properly [enforcing the label](#), whether through inspecting foods or punishing violators. Some worry that “organic” has [turned into a marketing term](#) with [little meaning](#). Still, when you buy organic goods at most stores and from most known brands, you can be largely reassured they meet these guidelines.

We’ve [tackled this topic in detail before](#), and for more information on the USDA’s organic labeling program, [check out this fact sheet](#) or visit [the USDA’s organic certification portal](#). If you’re not in the United States, the organic labeling system may differ. For example, here are the [organic regulations in the European Union](#).

What are the benefits of organic food?

Now that we know what it means to be “organic,” we can discuss the benefits—or, in some cases, perceived benefits—of buying organic food. There are more considerations than just the price tag and the nutritional content.

The [Annals of Internal Medicine study](#) found that organic foods have no substantial vitamin or mineral advantage (save phosphorous, which is in high abundance in human diets anyway) over foods that are conventionally grown. The study concluded:

Nutritional value

The published literature lacks strong evidence that organic foods are significantly more nutritious than conventional foods. Consumption of organic foods may reduce exposure to pesticide residues and antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

The study has been [hotly debated](#), and some outlets say the added-cost of organics is [wasted money](#). Others point out that [focusing on nutritional benefit misses the point entirely](#) of certifying, supporting and buying organic foods. Regardless, the thrust is this: the results [should cast doubt](#) on any assertions that organic foods somehow have higher nutritional benefits than conventional foods. Granted, this study is far from the last word on nutritional value and organic foods, but it's important to note that nutritional value is neither in the stated mission of the USDA's organic food certification program (and, from what we can tell, not in that of other countries either).

Environmental impact

One of the goals of organically grown and produced foods is to encourage environmentally friendly farming and growth practices, cycling of natural resources, and growing food without the need for harsh pesticides or chemical fertilizers. This makes many organic crops more volatile, but focuses on environmental sustainability as well as yield. Some studies have shown [organic farms have a lower environmental impact](#) than conventional ones. A sharp eye would note that this could be because organic yields tend to be lower and there are fewer organic farms in general. Ultimately, as a consumer it's important to determine whether the money you spend on groceries should make a statement about your position on issues like local agriculture or environmental sustainability. It may or may not—science can't make a decision for you.

Public health and antibiotics

[The Atlantic also points out](#) that because organic foods—especially organic meats—have to contain 95-100% organic materials, synthetic additives and antibiotics cannot be added to the animal feed. If that's a concern to you, then that's another point to consider when buying groceries. At the same time, some practices, like irradiation, which minimize contaminants, are not part of the organic food production process, which is another factor to consider. The 2012 study had two things to say about contamination: That conventionally farmed meat and produce were more likely to be contaminated with antibiotic-resistant bacteria, but both had equal risk of being contaminated overall.

Pesticides and chemical additives: One point that the study also made was that organic foods are much less likely to contain pesticides (consuming organics reduces risk of consuming pesticides by 30%) although both conventional and organic foods were shown to have pesticide traces well below USDA limits. It's also worth noting that [organic doesn't equal "pesticide free,"](#) it means their use is restricted or limited to an allowed list. [The Atlantic notes:](#)

In the Stanford study, just 7% of organic foods were found to have traces of pesticides, compared to 38% of conventionally-farmed produce. Again, that doesn't mean organic

foods will supercharge your health — you'll just be at less risk of exposure to potentially harmful substances, for whatever that's worth to you. Quantifying that benefit is a contentious area and certainly worthy of more research.

It's also worth noting that because organic foods are grown without harsh herbicides and pesticides, it means the farmers and pickers who bring you those foods don't have to work in an environment full of them either.

Taste

Obviously, whether organic foods taste better is a matter of, well, taste. Many people swear by the difference in organic eggs, dairy, meats and some produce. Others say that [when blindfolded](#), those same people wouldn't be able to tell the difference between organic and conventional. There's not much data on this topic, so we'll have to leave it up to you and your palate to decide.

Price

At most supermarkets, organic goods come at a premium price. Part of it is a matter of supply and demand, and part of it is that organic produce, meat and dairy often require more money to grow than conventional goods. It doesn't always have to be that way though: signing up for [a local CSA](#), scouting out [a nearby food co-op](#) or even hitting your local farmer's market can all bring you high quality, often organically grown foods at great (even negotiable) prices. Still, whether or not the price is right depends on you and your budget.

Should I buy organic or not?

Whether you should buy organic foods over conventional depends entirely on you, your budget, and what you expect to get out of those foods. If the reason you've been buying organic foods is because you believe they're "better for you" nutritionally, then there's no reason to continue. However, if you've been buying them because they're "better for you" in terms of chemical pesticides or growth hormones or antibiotics, you'll definitely be getting food with lower levels. If the critical concern for you is environmental sustainability, or putting your money where your agricultural mouth is, then you have a compelling reason to keep buying organic.

Dr. Darya Rose, who writes the blog [Summer Tomato](#), [has a great breakdown of the issue](#) and points out that whether you should buy organic is a bigger picture issue that individuals have to decide based on their own needs. For many, eating organic is a luxury they can't afford. For others, it's a matter of taste and quality. Whatever you choose to do, you should go into the decision with both eyes open.