News Release
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Organic: what does it mean?

Walking through your local supermarket, you will find organic fruits and vegetables, organic meat, cereal and other foods. So, what’s the difference? Are they healthier? Organic foods have grown in popularity in recent years and so has consumer confusion.

The word "organic" refers to the way farmers grow and process agricultural products, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products and meat. Organic farming practices are designed to encourage soil and water conservation and reduce pollution. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has established an organic certification program that requires all organic foods to meet strict government standards. These standards regulate how such foods are grown, handled and processed. Before a product can be labeled "organic," a Government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make sure the farmer is following all the rules to meet USDA organic standards. Farmers must demonstrate these characteristics for three years prior to becoming a certified organic farm. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to your local supermarket or restaurant must be certified, also.

Read the label. There are four different types of organic labels: “100% organic”, “organic”, “made with organic ingredients”, and others.

Foods labeled “100% organic” are the only foods guaranteed to be 100% organic. Foods labeled “organic” must contain at least 95% organic ingredients. “100% organic”
and “organic” are the only foods allowed to use the USDA organic seal. This seal is voluntary but many organic producers use it.

Foods labeled “made with organic ingredients” must contain at least 70% organic ingredients. Other foods containing organic ingredients may label the ingredient organic in the ingredient list.

Choosing to purchase organic foods is a personal choice for consumers. Many factors influence this decision. Some people choose organic food because they prefer the taste. Others choose organic to limit their exposure to pesticide residue. Organic produce typically carries significantly fewer pesticide residues than conventional produce. However, residues on most products – both organic and nonorganic – don’t exceed government safety thresholds. Some consumers are concerned about food additives. Organic regulations ban or severely restrict the use of food additives including preservatives, artificial sweeteners, colorings and flavorings, and monosodium glutamate. The environment is another factor in this choice. Organic farming practices are designed to benefit the environment by reducing pollution and conserving water and soil quality. Are organic foods more nutritious and safer to eat? USDA makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food. Studies have found no significant difference in nutrition quality between organic and nonorganic foods. Organic foods typically cost more because of more-expensive farming practices.

Whether you choose organic or not when shopping, it is important to read labels to know what you are buying. Remember to look for the USDA organic seal and check the label to see if what you are buying is actually organic. For more detailed information on the USDA organic standards, visit their web site at http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop.

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