

BUYING ORGANIC

Almost two-thirds of American consumers bought some type of organic food or beverage last year, up from about half in 2004. And they usually spend about 50 percent or 100 percent more for these organic products. But is it worth it? Yes and no. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has found that even after you wash certain fruits and vegetables, they still contain much higher levels of pesticide residue than others. This includes apples, berries, grapes, spinach, and potatoes. On the other hand, that's not true for bananas, mangos, or corn. Here are some facts to help you decide what organic, or natural, foods you should buy:

What organic means:

- * Animals have not been treated with: antibiotics, growth hormones, or feed made from animal byproducts.
- * Animals must have been fed organic feed for at least a year.
- * Animals must have access to the outdoors.
- * Food hasn't been genetically modified or irradiated.
- * Fertilizer does not contain sewage sludge or synthetic ingredients.
- * Produce hasn't been contaminated with synthetic chemicals used as pesticides.

What the labels mean:

- * "100% Organic": Product must contain 100 percent organic ingredients.
- * "Organic": At least 95 percent of ingredients are organically produced.
- * "Made with Organic Ingredients": At least 70 percent of ingredients are organic. The remaining 30 percent must come from the USDA's approved list.
- * "Free-range" or "Free-roaming": Misleading term applied to chicken, eggs and other meat. The animal did not necessarily spend a good portion of its life outdoors. The rule states only that outdoor access be made available for "an undetermined period each day." U.S. government standards are weak in this area.
- * "Natural" or "All Natural": Does not mean organic. There is no standard definition for this term except with meat and poultry products. (USDA defines "natural" as not containing any artificial flavoring, colors, chemical preservatives, or synthetic ingredients). The claim is not verified. The producer or manufacturer alone decides whether to use it.

The "Dirty Dozen": Must-buy organic foods

Fruit

- * Apples
- * Cherries
- * Grapes, imported (Chili)
- * Nectarines
- * Peaches
- * Pears
- * Raspberries
- * Strawberries

Vegetables

- * Bell peppers
- * Celery
- * Potatoes
- * Spinach

The U.S. Department of Agriculture found that even after washing, some fruits and vegetables consistently carry much higher levels of pesticide residue than others. Based on an analysis of more than 100,000 U.S. government pesticide test results, researchers at the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a research and advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., have developed the “dirty dozen” fruits and vegetables, above, that they say you should always buy organic, if possible, because their conventionally grown counterparts tend to be laden with pesticides. They cost about 50 percent more — but are well worth the money.

Other organic foods worth considering:

- * Milk
- * Beef
- * Poultry

Reduce the risk of exposure to the agent believed to cause mad cow disease and minimize exposure to other potential toxins in non-organic feed. These foods contain no hormones, and antibiotics — which have been linked to increased antibacterial resistance in humans — have not been added to the food. They often cost 100 percent more than conventional products.

No need to go organic with these foods:

- | Fruit | Vegetables |
|--------------|---------------|
| * Bananas | * Asparagus |
| * Kiwi | * Avocado |
| * Mangos | * Broccoli |
| * Papaya | * Cauliflower |
| * Pineapples | * Corn |
| | * Onions |
| | * Peas |

These products generally do not contain pesticide residue.

Seafood

Wild or farmed fish can be labeled organic, despite the presence of contaminants such as mercury and PCBs. No USDA organic certification standards for seafood — producers are allowed to make their own organic claims.

Managing the high cost of organic foods:

Why does organic cost more?

Growing the food is more labor-intensive. And even though organic food is a growing industry, it doesn't have the economies of scale or government subsidies available to conventional growers.

How to save money buying organic food:

- * Comparison shop in local grocery stores.
- * Take advantage of local farmers' markets: Many farmers do not charge a premium.
- * Order by mail: Products such as organic beef can be shipped nationally.