Organic Foods: Why They’re Worth the Extra Cost

A decade ago, many supermarkets didn’t carry organic foods, or stocked little beyond some wilted lettuce and a basket of spotted apples. Today, you can find an assortment of organic produce at most stores, along with organic milk and other products. In fact, half of the organic food produced in the United States is now sold in large supermarkets, while health food chains like Whole Foods and Wild Oats account for only about 20 percent of organic food sales. Meanwhile, organic fare is increasingly showing up on restaurant menus, in college dining halls, and even at sports arenas.

As a longtime proponent of organic agriculture, I’m glad that organic foods are going mainstream. Rising consumer demand should lead to lower prices, but for now, organic foods typically cost more than conventional items because the supply is limited and the production and labor costs are higher. I think organic foods are worth the extra expense, and want to tell you when it’s most important to choose them.

What “organic” means. In 2001, the US Department of Agriculture established national standards for organic foods. Such foods are produced without the use of most conventional pesticides and without synthetic fertilizers. In addition, these foods have not been genetically modified, irradiated to kill bacteria, or fertilized with sewage sludge from waste treatment plants. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given organic feed and no antibiotics or growth hormones. (There are no organic standards for fish.) Food products cannot use the “USDA Organic” seal unless at least 95 percent of their ingredients are organic.

Why choose organic? For me, the three most important reasons to choose organic foods are that they’re safer, better for the environment, and probably more nutritious. An added bonus is that organic foods often taste better.

- Safer: Switching to organic foods gave 23 Seattle-area children “dramatic and immediate” protection from two pesticides widely used in conventional agriculture, according to recent research. Concentrations of the pesticides fell greatly in the elementary school-age children during a five-day period when organic foods were substituted for conventional foods. Pesticide residues might harm children’s developing nervous systems, and I worry that chronic, low-level exposure to environmental toxins (in our food, water, and air) may increase the risk of cancer and degenerative neurological disorders such as Parkinson’s disease and ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease).

- Better for the environment. In a recent study, organic farming produced the same yields of corn and soybeans as conventional farming, but used 30 percent less energy, less water, and no toxic pesticides (Biogenesis, July 2005).

- More nutritious. More research is needed, but there’s some evidence that organic foods have better nutritional profiles. A report issued in January by the nonprofit Organic Center (organic-center.org) found that on average, antioxidant levels were about 30 percent higher in organic foods compared to conventional foods grown under the same conditions. Other research shows organic catsup contains more than 50 percent higher levels of the carotenoid lycopene. Organically grown plants experience greater environmental stress (from insects, for example), so their innate defense mechanisms increase production of protective antioxidants.

Which foods to emphasize. Because it’s often more costly to buy organic, you may want to prioritize. In general, I recommend choosing organic versions of foods that you eat most often. The prices of organic products tend to be highest at mainstream supermarkets, somewhat less at health food chains, and may be lowest if you join a food coop, visit farmers’ markets, or buy a share in a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. Here’s more advice.

- Produce. The nonprofit Environmental Working Group (ewg.org) periodically updates its list of the “dirty dozen”—the 12 fruits and vegetables that are most contaminated with pesticides. Currently, peaches, strawberries, and apples top the list, followed by spinach, nectarines, celery, pears, cherries, potatoes, bell peppers, red raspberries, and imported grapes. Seek out organic varieties of these types of produce. If you use the zest of citrus fruits in recipes, try to get organic oranges and lemons, because the peel is the part most likely to be contaminated. And because even organic produce may harbor bacteria, you should wash it before use.

- Dairy products. Dairy cows are routinely given growth hormones to boost milk production. I suspect that these hormones contribute to the rise in hormonally driven cancers (breast and prostate) in humans. Choose organic milk, especially if you have children who drink a lot of it. Also, look for organic versions of other dairy products such as cheese, ice cream, yogurt, and butter.

- Beef, poultry, and eggs. If you eat beef, try to get organic varieties. Unlike most cattle, organically raised animals do not receive growth hormones, and organic feeding practices carry virtually no risk of transmitting mad-cow disease. Also, choose organic turkey, chicken, and eggs when possible in order to minimize consumption of antibiotic residues that are found in conventional products.

- Soy foods. Some 80 percent of the soybeans grown in this country are now genetically modified. While recent research suggests GM soybeans and corn don’t raise consumers’ risks of allergic reactions, one study found that the isoflavone content of GM soybeans was 12 to 14 percent lower than non-GM varieties. So if you’re eating soy foods to boost your isoflavone intake, you’re better off choosing organic varieties.

Plus, I suggest using only organic, expeller-pressed canola oil, meaning that chemicals weren’t used to extract the oil from rapeseed and pesticides weren’t sprayed on the crops. If you drink wine, look for organic varieties; grapes tend to be heavily treated with pesticides. Organic wine also doesn’t contain added sulfites, preservatives to which some people are sensitive. Grains tend to have lower pesticide residues than produce, but organic versions may have more fiber and higher levels of nutrients because they’re less processed.

fast fact: Annual US sales of organic foods are expected to reach $15 billion this year.