



The Organic Crush

Opting for organic foods is an effectual choice for personal and planetary health. But going organic all the time can be tough and expensive. Treat your family to good health and taste by learning how to choose the right foods that will make the biggest impact.

Compilation and editing: Yvonne Tan; Photos: stock.xchange





Choosing organic food that is better for your health and the environment seems like a no-brainer, except they cost more and there isn't always a wide selection at the groceries. So how can you make sure the money and time you spend on going organic is worth it?

What Organic Means

For agricultural produce to be labelled as organic by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), no pesticides, genetic modification, growth hormones, artificial fertilisers or irradiation can be used in their cultivation.

In comparison, conventional farmers use a variety of these methods. According to

the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), more than 1.2 billion pounds of pesticides were used in America in 2001.

For meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products to be classified as organic, they must come from livestock that are not on growth hormones or antibiotics, are free-ranging and given organically grown feed.

Why Organic Produce Is Better

While studies have linked the consumption of pesticides to health issues relating to cancer, birth defects and nervous system damage, the health effects are not always clear-cut.

They depend on factors like pesticide toxicity, level of exposure, age, genetic susceptibility and exposure to other toxins.

With children, there is more cause for concern. Their immune and organ systems are not fully developed, making them more vulnerable to pesticides. According to a report by The Organic Center, "the average child in America is exposed to five pesticides daily in their food and drinking water." But the silver lining is: "Switching to an organic diet for just five days virtually eliminates any sign of exposure to organophosphate insecticides."

Other parts of the equation: Pesticides seep through the soil and get into our water and ecosystem. Organic farming practices help reduce pollutants in groundwater and drinking water, and create richer soil that aids plant growth while reducing erosion.

There are more compelling reasons to

choose organic meat and dairy products. Conventionally raised cows are given recombinant bovine growth hormones to boost growth and milk production. These cows usually develop mastitis, an infection of the breast tissue.

Traces of antibiotics used to treat it can end up in the products of these animals. Ingesting antibiotics not only causes allergic reactions in humans, but also enables bacteria to develop resistance.

How To Get Started

There are studies that say some organic foods contain higher nutrient levels. Examples include organic ketchup, which contains 57% more lycopene (the red

pigment found in tomatoes that is a powerful antioxidant) than regular ketchup. But are organic products always more nutritious than conventional alternatives?

The answer is "not necessarily". Charles Benbrook, a chief scientist at The Organic Center, which aims to raise awareness about organic products, says some organic products are less processed, which means they may contain fewer chemically adulterated ingredients.

Therefore, you need to read labels carefully and look at each product in its own right – because even organic potato chips may contain as many calories and saturated fat as conventional ones. Even if you can't follow through this all the time, knowing

which fruits and vegetables make the most sense to go organic helps (see related article on *The Dirty Dozen*).

When doing your marketing, besides asking your grocer to stock more organic food, you can buy in season or purchase fresh produce at farmers' markets. Making a few organic food purchases - especially items consumed by children - will have a positive impact on the planet, health standards for farm workers and animals, and your family's well-being.

Sources: *Lifewise, Positive Thinking and Prevention*

The Dirty Dozen

Go organic for these foods if you can, as recent research by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and USDA shows high levels of pesticide and chemical contamination in conventionally grown ones:

1. Meat

The EPA reports that meat is contaminated with higher levels of pesticides than any plant food. Many chemical pesticides are fat-soluble and deposit in the fatty tissues of animals. Animal feed that contains animal derivatives compounds the accumulation, which is directly passed on to consumers.



Antibiotics, drugs and hormones also accumulate and latch on to consumers too. Ocean fish carry a higher risk for heavy metals than pesticides, though many freshwater fish are exposed to high levels of pesticides from contaminated water.

2. Milk, Cheese and Butter

The aforementioned reasons also cause the fat in dairy products to pose a high risk for pesticide contamination. Animals accumulate pesticides and chemicals in their milk and meat. Growth hormones and antibiotics are also invariably found in commercial dairy products.



3. Peaches and Nectarines

45 different pesticides are regularly applied to peaches and nectarines in conventional orchards. 97% of nectarines and 95% of peaches tested for pesticide residue show contamination from multiple chemicals.



4. Strawberries and Cherries

On average, 300 pounds of pesticides are applied to every acre of strawberries (compared to an average of 25 pounds per acre for other foods). 36 different pesticides are commonly used on strawberries, and 90% of strawberries tested register pesticide contamination above safe levels. Cherries are almost as dodgy with 25 pesticides and 91% contamination.



5. Apples and Pears

With 36 different chemicals detected in FDA testing (half of which are neurotoxins that cause brain damage), apples are almost as culpable as strawberries. 91% of apples tested positive for pesticide residue. Peeling non-organic apples reduces but does not eliminate the danger of ingesting these chemicals. Pears are a notch higher than apples with 35 pesticides and 94% contamination.



6. Grapes

35 different pesticides are used commonly in vineyards. Thin-skinned and delicate, grapes are sprayed multiple times during different stages of growth.



7. Tomatoes

More than 30 pesticides are sprayed on commercially grown tomatoes. Chemicals infiltrate through their thin skin, so peeling does not help in any way.



8. Celery

Conventionally grown celery is subjected to at least 29 different chemicals, which cannot be washed off because celery does not have any protective skin. 94% of celery tested was found to have pesticide residues in violation of safe levels.



9. Spinach and Other Greens

The FDA found spinach to be the vegetable most frequently tainted with potent pesticides used on food. 83% of conventionally grown spinach tested was found to be contaminated with dangerous levels of at least some of the 36 chemical pesticides commonly used to grow it.



10. Potatoes

Being one of the most popular vegetables does not spare potatoes from becoming tainted with pesticides and fungicides. 29 pesticides are commonly used and 79% of potatoes tested exceed safe levels of pesticides.



11. Red and Green Bell Peppers

Bell peppers are one of the most heavily sprayed foods, with standard use of 39 pesticides. 68% of bell peppers tested had high levels of pesticide residue. The thin skin of peppers does not offer much protection from spraying and is often waxed with harmful substances.



12. Coffee

Most coffee is grown in countries where there are little or no standards regulating the use of chemicals and pesticides on food.

