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Health Made Simple

ORGANIC SHOPPING GUIDE

Each year, more and more customers are switching to organic products. Everywhere you turn, you hear that organic food is safer, healthier, and more nutritious. Some even say it tastes better. Yet, over 200 studies indicate that organic foods don't necessarily have more vitamins or minerals than conventionally grown foods.

The opinions are mixed, so it's important to do some research on your own. For most people, navigating through the maze of organic food labels is a real challenge. What products are really organic? Is there any difference between organic and natural? Are organic products worth the cost?

The truth is that organically grown foods are not cheap. The best thing you can do is to prioritize what foods to purchase based on the amount of chemicals they're likely to contain. A handy tool is the Dirty Dozen, a list that shows which produce has the highest pesticide residues.

WHAT DOES ORGANIC REALLY MEAN?



Organic food sales have reached a new record of \$39.7 billion in 2015, which accounts for about four percent of total U.S. food sales. Nowadays, organic products are widely available in over 20,000 health stores and three out of four grocery stores across America. As the demand for these goods increases, the price continues to remain high. Organic fresh fruits and vegetables are on the top of the list for most customers. Organic dairy foods account for over 15 percent of sales.

Statistics indicate that nearly 13 percent of all produce sold in the U.S. is organic. Increasingly more Americans are using organic products on a daily basis. This trend is rapidly spreading worldwide. Customers who go organic are looking for safer, more natural foods.

Make sure you understand what organic really means. According to the OFPA (Organic Foods Production Act), fruits and vegetables that are sold as organic are grown within fertilizers or pesticides. Organic meat is supposed to be free of growth hormones, antibiotics, and chemicals.

Any food labeled as "organic" or "100% organic" should contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients. These products have no GMOs or synthetic compounds. However, be aware that foods labeled as "made with organic ingredients," are not actually organic and can not display the USDA seal. They only contain about 70 percent organic ingredients.

Farmers who grow organic fruits and vegetables are not allowed to use conventional methods to control weeds. They rely on crop rotation and natural fertilizers, which makes food safer. Keep in mind that organic, hormone-free, and all natural are not the same thing.

In general, foods labeled "natural" contain minimally processed ingredients. However, this doesn't mean they are organic. Meat and dairy labeled "grass-fed" indicate that most nutrients in the animal's diet come from grass, but this doesn't limit the use of pesticides, hormones, or antibiotics. If the label says "free-range," the animals have been raised in an area with unlimited access to water and food. Unless a product has the USDA Organic Seal, you have no guarantee that it's organic.

WHY BUY ORGANIC?

Customers choose organic food for different reasons. Some want to improve their diet and get more nutrients. Some eat organic foods for their health benefits. Others do it in order to reduce their carbon footprint and protect the environment. Going organic is also a good way to support local farmers. By switching to organic produce, customers can avoid long-term exposure to pesticides, GMOs, antibiotics, and toxic compounds.

According to the USDA, organic food can not contain the following substances:

- Acid-activated bentonite
- Agar-agar
- Alcohols
- Allyl isothiocyanate
- Aluminum sulfate
- Arsenic
- Silica dioxide
- Sodium acid pyrophosphate
- Sodium lauryl sulfate
- Streptomycin
- Parasitocides
- Phosphoric acid
- Propylene glycol
- Tetracycline
- Diethylaminoethanol

The list contains hundreds of ingredients that are harmful to human health. Some boast carcinogenic properties and should be avoided at all costs.

Experts claim that food doesn't have to be organic to be healthy and safe. However, they agree that going organic can minimize your exposure to chemicals and hormones. GMOs (genetically modified organisms), which are widely used in conventional produce, have been associated with a high risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, obesity, and antibiotic resistant infections in adults and children. Grass-fed meat, organic fruits and vegetables, pastured eggs, and organic dairy are much safer and sustainable than conventionally grown produce.

IS ORGANIC FOOD BETTER FOR YOU?

From better overall health to a stronger immune system, going organic has a myriad of benefits. Many customers claim that organic food has a better taste than conventional produce. However, researchers say that food flavor has nothing to do with whether it was grown organically or not. The biggest advantage is the reduced risk of chemical contamination. Additionally, buying organic promotes animal welfare and helps reduce your environmental impact.

Even though the research is mixed, some studies indicate that organic farming preserves the nutrients in food to a greater extent than conventional farming. A study conducted by Newcastle University in 2007 has found that organic fruits and vegetables boast up to 40 percent more iron, zinc, and vitamin C. Another study conducted in 2003 suggests that organic berries contain 52 percent more vitamin C and 58 percent more polyphenols compared to their traditional counterparts. On average, organic produce offers 13.6 percent more phosphorus, 29.3 percent more magnesium, and 21.1 percent more iron than conventionally grown foods.

Since organic produce contains no antibiotics, pesticides, or growth hormones, it's safer for children and pregnant women. The widespread use of antibiotics on animals has led to the development of new bacteria strains. Pesticides have been shown to increase the risk of birth defects, cancer, brain toxicity, and neurodegenerative diseases. Every day, we are exposed to a dangerous mix of chemicals that affect health long term. On top of that, conventionally grown food may contain new ingredients that haven't been tested for safety yet. The side effects of pesticides and other toxins are clearly documented.

A recent study has found that organic meat and dairy provide about 50 percent more omega-3 essential fats compared to their non-organic counterparts. Additionally, the levels of flavonols and anthocyanins on organic crops are 50 percent higher than those in conventional crops. These antioxidants fight oxidative damage and delay aging.

Organic food promotes biodiversity and helps protect future generations. It's also the best way to prevent soil erosion, save energy, and support the local economy. Organic farming works in harmony with nature and uses labor-intensive practices that protect the ecosystem.

WHEN TO BUY ORGANIC FOOD

No one can deny that organic food is costly. Some organically grown products are 200 percent more expensive than their conventional counterparts. The key is to prioritize your purchases and buy organic to the extent you can.

For instance, conventional fruits and vegetables carry the highest risk of pesticide exposure, so it's worth buying organic. Conventional beef, poultry, and dairy may contain antibiotics. Switching to grass-fed meat and pastured eggs is a smart decision. Organic packaged food is free of synthetic dyes and additives, which have been linked to ADHD and cancer. These products are worth the cost too. Things are a little bit different when it comes to fish and seafood. Currently, there are no government-approved standards for labeling seafood as "organic."

WHAT'S UP WITH THE DIRTY DOZEN PLUS?

Choosing what foods to buy organic can be difficult. This is where the Dirty Dozen Plus comes in handy. This list makes it easier to decide which organic produce is worth paying more for. The Dirty Dozen Plus lists the fruits and vegetables with the HIGHEST pesticide load, such as:

- Strawberries
- Peaches
- Apples
- Cherries
- Nectarines
- Grapes
- Celery
- Tomatoes
- Spinach
- Hot peppers
- Potatoes
- Domestic blueberries
- Imported snap peas
- Cucumbers
- Sweet bell peppers
- Collard greens
- Kale
- Lettuce
- Pears
- Plumbs
- Mangos
- Onions

Cauliflower, mushrooms, sweet potatoes, bananas, and watermelon are on this list too. Yet, we consume these foods on a daily basis without being aware of the health risks involved. If you care about your health, choose their organic versions. Simply write down what produce you consume the most, check out the Dirty Dozen Plus list, and then prioritize your expenses accordingly.

There is another list called the Clean Fifteen, which indicates the produce that are the LEAST likely to be contaminated with pesticides. These include:

- Avocado
- Sweet corn
- Cabbage
- Pineapple
- Onion
- Frozen sweet peas
- Mango
- Kiwi
- Papaya
- Asparagus
- Grapefruit
- Eggplant
- Summer squash

A small part of summer squash, papaya, and sweet corn in the U.S. is produced from genetically engineered seed stock. If you want to eat clean, buy organic versions of these foods. Despite their high pesticide content, the produce on the Dirty Dozen list are still healthier than most snacks and processed foods available in stores. Be aware that washing and peeling conventional produce doesn't lower your risk of pesticide exposure. The only way to avoid these chemicals is to buy organic.

For most customers, switching to organic foods is a gradual process. If you're on a tight budget, start by replacing the produce from the Dirty Dozen list with organic versions. Over time, incorporate a variety of organic produce in your diet.

WHAT ABOUT MEAT AND DAIRY?

Similar to fruits and vegetables, organic meats have a different nutritional value and chemical composition than conventional animal products. Ideally, your diet should include grass-fed meat, organic yogurt and cheese, pastured eggs, and wild-caught fish. Research indicates that organic meat contains up to 47 percent more polyunsaturated fatty acids than conventionally grown meat. These healthy fats reduce inflammation, prevent heart disease, and protect against cognitive decline.

Studies have also found that organic milk boasts 69 percent more ALA (alpha-lipoic acid) and 41 percent more CLA (conjugated linoleic acid) than its conventional counterpart. These dietary fats lower bad cholesterol levels and support cardiovascular health.

Both organic and conventional meats are high in zinc, iron, B-complex vitamins, and protein. Organic dairy appears to have more iron and vitamin E, but lower levels of selenium and iodine. Additionally, grass-fed meat contains no antibiotics. These drugs are used on animals to increase the amount of energy obtained from food. They also alter gut flora and can become "lodged" in different tissues.

Even at low levels, antibiotics leave residues in the body. These compounds also trigger the formation of "superbugs," which are resistant to conventional antibiotics. What most people don't realize is that the same substances that fatten up pork, cattle, and other animals may also cause weight gain in humans.

Conventionally grown meat is high in various hormones, such as testosterone, progesterone, and estrogen, which may affect its composition. In general, these hormones are administered to animals about three months before slaughter to increase their weight. Many of these substances have been banned in Europe for over 30 years.

When ingested, they mess up your hormonal balance and trigger a series of reactions. For example, high IGF-1 levels have been linked to breast and colon cancer. On top of that, the pesticides from animal feed end up in meat and eggs. When you eat conventional meat and dairy, these toxins accumulate in your adipose tissue. Over the years, they cause toxin buildup, weight gain, fatigue, and other disorders.

Health experts recommend buying locally produced organic meat and dairy. Imported meat loses some of its nutrients during transportation. If you have a limited budget, choose ground steak, organ meats, and cheaper cuts of meat.

In what concerns fruits and vegetables, buy in season to reduce your expenses. Local and seasonal organic produce costs less than imported produce. Since the crops are picked at their peak, they're fresher and tastier than their conventional counterparts.

Another simple way to save money on organic produce is to buy in bulk. Most supermarkets offer discounts on dried fruit, potatoes, organic grains, and other foods purchased in large quantities. Generic brands are a good choice too. You can also use coupons to keep the price low. Depending on where you live, consider growing your own food. It's one of the best things you can do for your health.