

Organic versus Conventional Foods: Is There a Nutritional Difference?

Organic foods have gained popularity due to the perception that organic foods are safe, wholesome and all around better for you. But are they?



Organic is actually a food production process that has been defined by the USDA based on the principles of reducing the use of synthetic chemicals and fertilizers and raising food animals without antibiotics and growth promotants, says Dr. Ruth MacDonald, professor and chair of the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at Iowa State University.

Producers who want to use the USDA organic label on their food must be certified and comply with federal regulations just as conventional producers do. Both organic and conventional foods are inspected and growers must follow rules for safe production practices.



Both organic and conventional foods are regulated and monitored for safety when it comes to levels of chemicals, pesticides and antibiotics.

Consumers often assume that foods not labeled organic are less nutritious and may even contain harmful chemicals, pesticides and antibiotics. The truth is in the research: **There is very little evidence showing significant differences in the nutritional value of organic and conventional foods.**

According to Dr. MacDonald, both are excellent sources of many nutrients and bioactive compounds. Dr. MacDonald says there have been some studies showing differences in some fatty acids or lipid-soluble compounds (e.g. carotenoids), for example, between organic and conventionally-grown crops, but these differences were minor and didn't have a significant impact on overall nutrient content.

So if there's no difference in nutritional value, does that mean there's also no difference in taste? Pretty much! Dr. MacDonald tells us that controlled research studies of organic and conventional goods using sensory analysis have been conducted and no differences in perception of taste were found. It's also important that there are many other factors that influence the quality and taste of foods, such as freshness, storage conditions, variety of the crop or product and, of course, personal preference.

The bottom line: Research studies show organic foods do not provide special nutritional or safety benefits and conventional foods are as nutritious and healthful.

The decision to purchase organic foods is personal and in our country people have a variety of food choices to make. ■

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