Switch to organic foods? [1]

Dear Alice,

I've been thinking about switching to organic food because of the supposed drawbacks of inorganic food, but I'm having trouble finding unbiased information on the subject. What are the advantages and disadvantages of eating, buying, and producing organic food versus inorganic food? Should I make the switch to organic?

Thanks,
Concerned Global Citizen

Answer

Dear Concerned Global Citizen,

The popularity of organic foods does make some people wonder, "is conventional (non-organic) food bad for me?!" Well, here's the lowdown, although the answer may not be as clear-cut as you were hoping for.

Organic farming is a chemical-free approach to producing foods, including fruits, vegetables, grains, meat, dairy, and just about anything you can imagine. "Chemical-free" means no genetic modification, irradiation, hormones in livestock, fertilizer made from sewage sludge (comprised of human/organic waste, industrial waste matter, storm-water runoff from roads and other paved areas and so on), pesticides, and no synthetic ingredients; all of which are allowed in conventional foods. Organic farmers are supposed to emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of water and soil (by practicing crop-rotation) to enhance environmental quality for future generations. Ideally, this all means fewer chemicals on your food, going into your body, and sent into the environment during the food growing process. In the U.S., organic farmers must be certified by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in order to label any food "organic."

People who buy organic are sometimes also interested in supporting family and/or local farmers, and may associate buying organic with a smaller-scale, more environmentally friendly type of farming. Some organic farms are indeed family-run, smaller farms that provide their local area with seasonal goods and are committed to preserving their land. Despite the bucolic ideal the word "organic" may inspire, many organic farmers are also large agribusiness operations who ship their food far and wide to consumers of organics around the world.

Depending on your concerns related to food, your health, and the environment, you may want
to keep in mind the distinctions between:

- organic vs. conventional food (How was my food grown? What environmental and health impacts may result from the pesticides, hormones, etc.?),
- local foods vs. foods from other regions or countries (How far did the food travel to get to me? Would I rather eat something organic from far away, or conventional food that took less gas while *en route* to my plate?), and
- small-scale/family farmers vs. larger/industrial farms (What sort of business am I supporting?).

Among the organic/local/small-farmer camps, some people choose to buy all organic food, some people buy a mix of organic and/or local food, and some people buy primarily local foods, regardless of the organic status, and some people base food buying decisions on factors such as price, seasonality of produce, and whether produce looks fresh.

You can find organic produce anywhere from farmer’s markets to natural food stores to nationwide grocery chains. Since use of the term "organic" is regulated in the U.S., buying organic pasta, crackers, carrots or beef means you are getting a product that is at least 95 percent organic. If your favorite cookies bear the label "made with organic ingredients" that means that 70 percent or more of the ingredients are organically grown. To learn more about what "organic" means, check out the [USDA standards](#2). (By the way, "natural" does not mean "organic." Any product can be labeled with phrases like "all-natural" because the government does not regulate these terms.)

As far as benefits to the environment, the jury is in, and has concluded that organic farming practices can increase biodiversity and improve soil quality, as well as decrease chemical outputs. However regarding health benefits for humans, the jury is still out. Organic foods contain less pesticide residue, synthetic hormones, and antibiotics than their conventional counterparts, however it’s not clear if organics are actually healthier in terms of nutrients, or if they always taste better. You may want to think about your main reasons for considering organic foods to help guide your grocery purchasing:

- Am I interested in limiting my exposure to chemicals?
- Do I want to kick-start a healthy diet filled with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains?
- Is supporting local farms and/or stores important to me?
- Am I concerned with the environmental impacts of farming or food transport?

Your answers to these questions will help you decide what combination of organic, conventional, local, seasonal, and/or exotic foods makes sense in your diet, budget, and lifestyle. If you do switch to eating some or all organic food, Consumer Reports can help you get started by letting you know which items are most important to buy organic [3].

Navigating your food choices may seem daunting (or maybe thrilling! You do have a lot of options?). When it comes down to it, enjoying your mealtimes, eating a healthy variety of foods, and buying in a manner consistent with your values will serve you well. Best of luck!

Alice!

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