

Daily Union Article  
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"Is Organic Better?"

Over the past several years, there has been a dramatic increase in organic food interest and availability. Although originally only found in health food stores, organic food is now popular enough to have its own section in the local grocery store. But what does the label "organic food" mean? Is our perception of organic food correct, or have we been swayed by its popularity and trendy status.

The word "organic" is directly related to the way farmers grow and process their products. Fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products, and meat are grown and processed in ways that encourage soil and water conservation while reducing pollution.

Any product labeled as organic must be certified through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This means that the farm that has produced the organic product met strict government standards and regulations in how the food was grown, handled, and processed. Farmers who sell less than \$5,000 in organic foods annually are exempt from the certification. However, they are still required to follow the USDA's regulations in order to qualify their products as organic. Foods that meet the USDA's standards can then use the "USDA Organic" label. Although the seal is voluntary, many organic producers use it.

Single ingredient foods that are completely organic, such as fruits, vegetables, and eggs, are labeled 100% organic and can carry the USDA seal.

Food that have a combination of ingredients, such as salsa or breakfast cereal, can use the seal in combination with the following words (depending on the number of organic ingredients):

- **100 percent organic.** Products must be either completely organic or made of all organic ingredients.
- **Organic.** Products must be at least 95% organic to use this term.

If a product contains at least 70% organic ingredients, it can use the phrase "made with organic ingredients" on the label. It cannot use the USDA Organic label. Those foods that contain less than 70% organic ingredients can make no organic claim on their label.

MYTH: "Natural" equals "Organic". These words are not synonyms in the food labeling world. Words such as "all-natural", "hormone-free" or "free-range" must be truthful if put on the label, but they do not mean that they are also "organic." Only those foods that meet the USDA standards are legally approved to use the term "organic" in their label.

What influences a consumer to choose organic foods? In an online article titled "Nutrition and Healthy Eating", Mayo Clinic staff share the following factors that influence consumer decisions in this area:

**Taste:** This is a personal palate choice. Some consumers feel that the organic food tastes better while others cannot distinguish their taste from the same food that is not labeled organic.

**Pesticides:** Many growers use synthetic pesticides to protect their crops from molds, diseases, and insects. The spray they use can leave a residue on produce. Organic farmers use alternative methods for crop protections such as insect traps, more selective crop selection, predator insects or beneficial microorganisms. In an effort to reduce their exposure to the synthetic pesticides used in conventional farming methods, consumers choose organic produce, which usually carries a much lower level of pesticide residue. It is important to note, though, that residues on most products – both organic and non-organic – don't exceed government safety thresholds. In other words, the USDA monitors and regulates the level of pesticide residue on all food.

**Food Additives:** When a food is produced following the organic standards set by USDA, it has severe limits placed on it for the use of additives, processing aids, and fortifying agents, if permitted at all. Non-organic food often contains preservatives, artificial sweeteners, colorings, flavorings, and monosodium glutamate (MSG.)

**Environment:** Because of the environmentally friendlier farming practices used in the production of organic foods, many people choose organically grown foods over conventionally grown foods. Organic farming practices often generate minimal pollution and conserve water and soil quality.

Why does organic food cost more in the grocery store? It costs more to produce organic food because of the more-expensive farming practices. Meeting the USDA standards requires a significant shift in the methods used to produce and process the food. For example, using alternative pesticide control requires that farmers avoid the synthetic pesticides that are lower in cost due to their availability and often long-standing presence in farming practices.

Is organic food better for you than non-organic food? Research from Stanford University's Center for Health and Policy indicates that there is NO "strong evidence that organic foods are more nutritious or carry fewer health risks than conventional alternatives, though consumption of organic foods can reduce the risk of pesticide exposure."

Just because it costs more, does not mean that organic food is better for you. This perception, although common, has no significant research to back it up. Keep in mind that research has not shown organic food to be bad for you, either.

Does that mean that organic foods are a consumer scam? NO! It means that consumers need to be knowledgeable about what the label "organic" means and make a determination on how this should impact their choices and food budget. Just like with any other consumer decision, knowledge is power. Choosing between organic and non-organic foods is a choice based on personal preferences. Essentially, neither choice is wrong, but you need to know the facts to make the choice that suits your preferences.

For more information about healthy food choices, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!