

Organic food: Is it worth the extra money?

The “Dirty Dozen”: Must-buy organic foods ***Fruit***

- Apples
- Cherries
- Grapes, imported (Chili)
- Nectarines
- Peaches
- Pears
- Raspberries
- Strawberries

Vegetables

- Bell peppers
- Celery
- Potatoes
- Spinach

The U.S. Department of Agriculture found that even after washing, some fruits and vegetables consistently carry much higher levels of pesticide residue than others. Based on an analysis of more than 100,000 U.S. government pesticide test results, researchers at the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a research and advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., have developed the “dirty dozen” fruits and vegetables, above, that they say you should always buy organic, if possible, because their conventionally grown counterparts tend to be laden with pesticides. They cost about 50 percent more — but are well worth the money.

Other organic foods worth considering:

- Milk
- Beef
- Poultry

Reduce the risk of exposure to the agent believed to cause mad cow disease and minimize exposure to other potential toxins in non-organic feed. These foods contain *no* hormones, and antibiotics — which have been linked to increased antibacterial resistance in humans — have *not* been added to the food. They often cost 100 percent more than conventional products.

No need to go organic with these foods:

Fruit

- Bananas
- Kiwi
- Mangos
- Papaya
- Pineapples

Vegetables

- Asparagus
- Avocado
- Broccoli
- Cauliflower
- Corn
- Onions
- Peas

These products generally do not contain pesticide residue.

Seafood

Wild or farmed fish can be labeled organic, despite the presence of contaminants such as mercury and PCBs. No USDA organic certification standards for seafood — producers are allowed to make their own organic claims.

Cosmetics

Having “organic” or “natural” in its name doesn’t necessarily mean it’s safer. Only 11 percent of ingredients found in personal-care products, organic or not, have ever been screened for safety.

Managing the high cost of organic foods:

Why does organic cost more?

Growing the food is more labor-intensive. And even though organic food is a growing industry, it doesn't have the economies of scale or government subsidies available to conventional growers.

How to save money buying organic food:

- Comparison shop in local grocery stores.
- Take advantage of local farmers' markets: Many farmers do not charge a premium.
- Order by mail: Products such as organic beef can be shipped nationally.

How to protect yourself from “non-organic” pesticides:

Produce

- Buy fresh vegetables and fruits in season. When long storage and long-distance shipping are not required, fewer pesticides are used.
- Trim tops and the very outer portions of celery, lettuce, cabbages, and other leafy vegetables that may contain the bulk of pesticide residues.
- Peel and cook when appropriate, even though some nutrients and fiber are lost in the process.
- Eat a *wide variety* of fruits and vegetables. This would limit exposure to any one type of pesticide residue.
- Purchase only fruits and vegetables that are subject to USDA regulations. Produce imported from other countries is not grown under the same regulations as enforced by the USDA. Examples are strawberries and cantaloupes from Mexico.
- Wait until just before preparation to wash or immerse your produce in clean water. When appropriate, scrub with a brush. Experts at the University of California-Berkeley report that this removes nearly all insects and dirt, as well as bacteria and *some* pesticide residues.
- Special soaps or washes are not needed and could be harmful to you, depending on their ingredients. Read the label! Cold water is perfectly fine.

Meats/poultry/fish:

- Trim the fat from meat, and fat and skin from poultry and fish. Residues of some pesticides concentrate in animal fat.