

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

Why Buy Organic?

When you go to the grocery store, you undoubtedly go through the drill. The commercial produce or the organic produce? The sleek, shiny red apple or the unassuming one with the higher price tag? If you're like most people, you probably wonder if it's worth the extra price.

You decide. But first be aware of the facts.

Organic food is produced without the use of conventional fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, genetic modification, ionizing radiation or products made from sewage sludge (eg., synthetic Vitamin B1). Where it really starts is with the soil.

It was 1855 when the famous German chemist, Baron Justus von Liebig, published a paper postulating that the only minerals needed by growing plants were nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. Thus launched a thriving chemical fertilizer industry that persists in its virtually original form today.

More than 100 years later, the Nutrient Testing Laboratory (under USDA auspices) ran a series of mineral analyses on commercial produce from several regions in the U.S. Turns out there were several minerals missing from the 11 foods tested – among them boron and zinc. Other trace minerals critical to human



health such as cobalt, selenium and sulfur, have been since found to be missing in action as well. One mineral that *isn't* missing from soil samples is sodium – its presence in crops has actually risen dramatically. That's because chemical fertilizers contain large amounts of inorganic salts.

Turns out that not only are minerals missing, but the vitamin content of commercial produce has been drastically reduced as well. Consider these data from Mary Frost, a health journalist:

- To get the iron that was available in one cup of spinach in 1945, you would need to eat 65 cups today
- An orange with 50 mg. of Vitamin C complex in 1950, today contains 5 mg.

No small loss, I'm sure you'd agree.

Now, what happens when a plant doesn't receive all the nutrients it needs from the soil? In short, it becomes susceptible to all manner of bacterial, fungal and predator

(insect) invasion. That's when conventional farmers get out the big guns – the over 9,000 pesticides at their disposal for getting rid of the pesky invaders. Unfortunately for you and me, only 30 or so of these pesticides have been regulated by the EPA. That leaves 8,970 pesticides about whose effects we know very little – a particularly troubling development for children, whose developing immune systems are more susceptible to the toxic effects of chemicals.

Organic labeling

So how do you know if it's truly organic? Fortunately for consumers, as of 2002, special certification agencies must inspect organic farms to make sure practices comply with USDA organic standards. Unfortunately, to squeeze more profit out of existing inventory, the food giants are continuously looking for a loosening of organic standards.

Meanwhile, here's how you know what you're buying.

“100% organic” means that both the entire product and any processing done to it adhere to USDA certified organic standards. This is the gold standard for organic food: the cream of the crop, so to speak.

“Organic” indicates that 95% of the ingredients in the product are organic. You'll know that a product is “100%

organic” or “organic” by the green-and-white USDA Organic label affixed to it.

“Made with Organic” tells you that 70% or more of the product derives from organic ingredients. Many snack and sports bars sport this label. They may contain a mix of organic and non-organic fruits, nuts, grains and/or chocolates.

“Natural” is a popular label on foods, but bears no legal meaning and really tells you nothing. If a food product is labeled as “natural,” look for more information, like “cage free,” or “hormone and antibiotic free.” If there is no information on the label aside from “natural,” you can assume it’s commercial.

Heal yourself, heal the planet

Consumer demand for wholesome, organic foods is what will inevitably determine the fate of their availability. By eating organic foods, you are sparing your body not only the pesticides, but the dozens of artificial colors, flavors, preservatives, solvents, stabilizers, acids and gases that have infiltrated our food supply. By insisting on organic produce, you are not only enhancing the health of your family, you are sending a strong message that you support the earth’s natural mechanisms for providing its bounty. This will help Mother Earth start the long return to the strong, proud mama she once was.

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