

Decoding the Difference Between Natural and Organic

By Ashleigh Eisbrener

The healthy diet trend is sweeping across the nation creeping into local grocery stores and taking over whole aisles. It's easy to get caught up in the hype and purchase these "all natural" and "organic" products without fully understanding their health benefits, but are these words worth their price tag? We went behind the confusing food labels to find their true meanings and what we need to know before making our next grocery list.

What does the "natural" label really mean?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defines food as "natural" if it contains no man-made, manufactured or color additives or substances.

What does the "organic" label really mean?

Organic refers to the production, growth, distribution and selling of products based on a farming system that maintains and replenishes the soil without the use of toxins, pesticides and fertilizers. All organic goods must be produced without antibiotics, synthetic hormones and genetic engineering.

What is the history of organic farming?

The United States Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act in 1990 as part of the Farm Bill. It was followed for over 10 years while receiving a wide-range of input. These discussions resulted in the National Organic Program's definition and rules of organic foods, published by the United States Department of Agriculture in December 2000, put into action in October 2002.

Is natural and organic food regulated?

Any product can be labeled "natural" without going through a verification process, except for meat and poultry which is regulated by the Food Safety and Inspection Services who ensures all natural meat has no added artificial color or preservatives and has been minimally processed. On the other hand, organic food follows strict rules and regulations made by the FDA. In order to achieve organic certification, farmers and producers must go through a detailed, lengthy process.

What are the benefits of eating organically?

Organic farming is beneficial to lakes, rivers and wildlife since no chemicals, synthetic herbicides, toxic fertilizers and pesticides are used; keeps the top soil on the fields from eroding away; and is healthy for us because it doesn't use pesticides, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, fertilizers, hormones and artificial flavors or colors.

Is organic food healthier for you?

Most organic food has more nutritional value, but one of the biggest differences is in the meat. The best is found on certified organic farms that have been through a comprehensive process that takes about three years to accomplish. Once certified organic, the animals must be fed 100 percent certified organic feed or grass; given no antibiotics, hormones, pesticides, herbicides or other artificial drugs; able to roam freely; and checked often for healthiness. This results in happy animals and tender, better tasting, healthier meat.

How can I tell which produce is organic?

A number system can distinguish produce not already labeled. All fruits and vegetables have a four or five digit number. Any four digit number starting with three or four, such as 4054, means it was grown conventionally using pesticides and chemicals; a five digit number starting with a nine, such as 94054, means it was grown organically; and a five digit number starting with an eight, such as 84054, means it was genetically engineered.

What do the different organic labels mean?

The three different labels are "100 percent organic," "organic," and "made



100% Organic

Means all ingredients are organic. The USDA Organic logo may be used on the packaging.

Organic

Means a minimum of 95% of ingredients are organic. The package may include USDA Organic logo.



Ingredient panel only

Means the food has less than 70% organic ingredients. "Organic" can only be used on ingredient panel.

Made with organic ingredients

70% to 94% of the product is organic. USDA logo cannot be used on package.

with organic ingredients." "One hundred percent organic" means the item is composed entirely of certified organic products; an "organic" label means the item is composed of at least 95 percent of certified organic ingredients; and a "made with organic ingredients" label means the item is made of 70 to 94 percent of certified organic products.

How popular are organic products?

The United States organic industry grew 21 percent from 2005 to 2006 to reach almost 18 billion in consumer sales, according to the Organic Trade Association's 2007 Manufacturer Survey. The fastest growing organic food categories were meat (29 percent), dairy (25 percent), fruits and vegetables (24 percent) and breads and grains (23 percent).

How do I make the change towards an organic diet?

Eating completely organic can be difficult for families because on average, organic products cost 15 to 60 percent more, but there are ways you can increase your organic intake without increasing your grocery bill. Be strategic. Some organic products don't have a higher health value than conventional products. For example, don't buy organic produce that has a peel because the peel blocks pesticides anyways. Other ways to inexpensively eat organic are to farm your own produce, buy from a local farmers' market, buy a share in community-supported agriculture, buy in bulk, buy in-season, use coupons and shop deals online.

What to Buy Organic

Apples Nectarines
Celery Peaches
Cherries Peanut Butter
Grapes Pears
Ketchup Peppers
Lettuce Milk
Spinach
Strawberries
Tomatoes

What Not to Buy Organic

Asparagus Kiwi
Avocados Mangos
Bananas Onions
Broccoli Pineapples
Cabbage Peas
Corn

All Natural