

Which Organic Label Should You Trust?

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By Dr. Mercola



Many “health” experts continue to argue that there is little difference between organic and conventionally raised produce, but the scientific evidence -- and common sense -- says otherwise.

Food grown in healthier soil, with natural fertilizers and no chemicals, is quite simply more nutritious, and as an added boon, will not load you up with dangerous toxins that can destroy your health.

Health Benefits of Eating Organic

A 2003 study in the *Journal of Agricultural Food Chemistry*,^[1] for example, found that organic foods are better for fighting cancer. And in 2005, scientists found that, compared to rats that ate conventional diets, organically fed rats experienced various health benefits.

Rats that ate organic or minimally fertilized diets had:

- Improved immune system status
- Better sleeping habits
- Less weight and were slimmer than rats fed other diets
- Higher vitamin E content in their blood (for organically fed rats)

But some of the most compelling evidence comes from a \$25-million European-Union-funded study into organic food -- the largest of its kind to date.

The researchers obtained their results after growing fruit and vegetables, and raising cattle, on adjacent organic and non-organic sites.

This four-year study, called the [Quality Low Input Food \(QLIF\) project](#), found that organic food is FAR more nutritious than ordinary produce, and can help improve your health and longevity. They found that: [2]

- Organic fruit and vegetables contain up to **40 percent more antioxidants**
- Organic produce had **higher levels of beneficial minerals like iron and zinc**
- Milk from organic herds contained up to **90 percent more antioxidants**

They even went so far as to say that eating organic foods can help to increase the nutrient intake of people who don't eat the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

This study may have considerable impact once it's officially published, as its findings could overturn government advice -- at least in the U.K. -- which currently states that eating organic food is no more than a lifestyle choice.

Buyer Beware: Not All Organic Labels are Truthful or Even Pertinent

Although the organic label has really only become widely popular in the last several years, it has already been greatly compromised.

Whereas organic foods were once truly raised naturally, on small farms with great integrity, big business has now stepped in and tainted many of the principles upon which the organic label was founded.

Wal-Mart, for instance, is now the largest organic retailer in the United States. According to the Organic Consumers Association, the mega-store is[3]:

- Selling organic milk that comes from intensive confinement factory farm dairies

- Importing cheap organic foods and ingredients from China and Brazil
- Posting signs in its stores that mislead people into believing that non-organic items are actually organic

Organic food now represents a \$16-billion business, with sales growing by as much as 20 percent per year. Unfortunately, the quality and meaning of the organic label is undergoing an equally fast and exponential decline.

The sad fact is, you are being ripped off by much of the organic food you are buying.

One of the biggest rip-offs, in my opinion, is organic milk. Milk is not something I recommend that anyone drink unless it is in raw form. Organic milk is NOT raw milk; it is still pasteurized, and is associated with all of the same [health problems as regular pasteurized milk](#), regardless of its organic certification.

Another major deception is all of those “organic” junk foods like ice cream, crackers, cookies, pizzas and potato chips. A potato chip is one of the worst foods you can eat, regardless of whether or not the potato is organic.

Yet big business is cashing in on your desire to “have your cake and eat it too,” so to speak, and deceiving you into believing that you can eat cookies, ice cream and potato chips without feeling guilty because they’re “organic.”

What You Need to Know About Organic Labels

There are several different organic labels out there, but **only one relates directly to foods**: the USDA Organic seal.

This seal is your best assurance of organic quality.

Growers and manufacturers of organic products bearing the USDA seal have to meet the strictest standards of any of the currently available organic labels.

The USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) took effect October 21, 2002, and regulates the standards for any farm, wild crop harvesting, or

handling operation that wants to sell an agricultural product as organically produced. The labeling requirements of the NOP apply to raw, fresh products and processed products that contain organic agricultural ingredients.[4]

In order to qualify as organic, a product must be grown and processed using organic farming methods that recycle resources and promote biodiversity. Crops must be grown without synthetic pesticides, bioengineered genes, petroleum-based fertilizers, or sewage sludge-based fertilizers.[5]

Organic livestock must have access to the outdoors and cannot be given antibiotics or growth hormones.

- Products labeled "100 percent organic" must contain only organically produced materials
- Products labeled simply "organic" must contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients, whereas
- The label "made with organic ingredients" can contain anywhere between 70 to 95 percent organic ingredients

Organic products cannot be irradiated, are not allowed to contain preservatives or flavor enhancing chemicals, nor can they contain traces of heavy metals or other contaminants in excess of tolerances set by the FDA.[6]

Additionally, the pesticide residue level cannot be higher than 5 percent of the maximum EPA pesticide tolerance.[7]

For the complete *National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances* under the USDA organic label, see this [link](#).[8]

Do You Have to Buy Everything Organic?

Aside from the fact that organic food contains higher levels of vital nutrients, organic foods are naturally lower in residues and compounds that are seriously detrimental to your health, such as herbicide- and pesticide residues.

Organic fruits and vegetables are by definition grown without the use of harmful chemicals.

Aside from that, the use of pesticides and herbicides in conventional farming practices contaminates groundwater, ruins the soil structure and promotes erosion. They've also been linked to the mysterious "colony collapse disorder" that threatens pollinating honeybees around the world.

So with all that in mind, buying or growing as much organic food as possible is not only best for your health, but for the health of the entire planet.

That said, however, certain fruits and vegetables are subjected to far heavier pesticide use than others. And with food prices rising, many are looking for ways to buy the healthiest foods possible at the lowest cost.

One such way would be to focus on purchasing certain organic items, while "settling" for others that are conventionally-grown.

The Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit organization that advocates for policies that protect global and individual health, produces the [*Shoppers' Guide to Pesticides in Produce*](#). It is based on the results of nearly 43,000 pesticide tests.

Of the 43 different fruit and vegetable categories in the *Guide to Pesticides*, the following 12 foods had the **lowest pesticide load when conventionally grown**.

Consequently, they are the safest conventionally grown crops to consume:

Broccoli	Eggplant	Cabbage	Banana
Kiwi	Asparagus	Sweet peas	Mango
Pineapple	Sweet corn	Avocado	Onion

Meanwhile, these 12 fruits and vegetables had the **highest pesticide load**, making them the most important to buy or grow organic:

Peaches	Apples	Sweet bell peppers	Celery
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Nectarines	Strawberries	Cherries	Lettuce
Grapes (imported)	Pears	Spinach	Potatoes

Conventionally-grown strawberries, in particular, were found to be **highly toxic** due to a poisonous blend of pesticides in a previous [2007 EU study](#) as well.

But beware that the lists above are for fruits and vegetables only.

Non-organic meats actually have far higher concentrations of pesticides than all of the fruits and vegetables. And the highest concentration of pesticides is actually in non-organic butter.

So if you can only buy one organic food item it should be butter. Your next priority would be meats, and once those are addressed, then you'll want to focus on the fruit and vegetable list above.

Bear in mind also that *locally-grown* organics are your absolute BEST bet.

And oftentimes buying locally-grown food is your best choice even if it's grown conventionally, as the environmental impact of shipping organic produce across the globe can cancel out many its benefits. Organic farming standards are also questionable in many parts of the world.

Look Beyond Organics -- Watch Out For Genetically Modified Foods!

While you may have heard about the most common GM food sources, such as corn, many people are clueless about just how much of your produce is now available in GM varieties. And, perhaps even worse, just how many [deliberate GMO field trials](#) are actually going on, all across the world.

A perfect example of the repercussions of this practice can be seen in Hawaii, where [non-GM papaya seed supplies are now so seriously contaminated by GM seeds](#) that at least 50 percent of organic seeds test positive for genetic modification!

That means you have a greater than 50/50 chance of buying a genetically modified fruit even when buying *organic* Hawaiian papaya...

Although the U.S. does not require GM foods to be labeled, you can still find out whether or not your produce is genetically engineered, by looking at its [PLU code](#).

Conventionally Grown	Organically Grown	Genetically Modified
4-digit code	5-digits starting with # 9	5-digits starting with # 8
<i>Ex: Conventionally grown banana: 4011</i>	<i>Ex: Organically grown banana: 94011</i>	<i>Ex: GM banana: 84011</i>

Here are a few other fruits that are LOW in pesticide residue, and therefore good candidates to purchase as conventionally-grown, however, double-check to make sure you're not buying a GM variety.

- **Avocado** -- A new GM avocado variety is scheduled to be introduced this year that is immune to "stress" and pests, per an Indian state [report](#) published in March, 2008.
- **Bananas** -- The first [GM banana](#) with extra genes that increase its levels of pro-vitamin A and iron is being unleashed in Australian field trials this year. At Cornell University, researchers are also working to [develop a banana](#) that carries the hepatitis B vaccine.
- **Pineapple** -- [GM pineapples](#), designed to produce greater levels of proteins, vitamins and sugars may already be on the market. An Australian GM pineapple called "Smooth Cayenne" has delayed flowering and herbicide resistance. It also contains the tobacco acetolactate synthase gene (suRB) from *Nicotiana tabacum*.
- **Kiwi** -- The [transgenic variety of kiwi](#) fruit is the *Actinidia deliciosa* from Italy.

Remember, if you can't afford to purchase all organic food, at least aim to buy produce that has a lower toxic load and has not been genetically modified.

[1] [Journal Agricultural Food Chemistry February 26, 2003;51\(5\):1237-41,](#)

[2] Quality Low Input Food Project, Carlo Leifert,

[3] Organic Consumers Association, Wal-Mart Charged with Selling Nonorganic Food as Organic, November 14, 2006,

[4] United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service, National Organic Program, Organic Labeling and Marketing Information,

[5] Food Marketing Institute, Natural and Organic Foods, Executive Summary,

[6] US Food and Drug Administration, August 2000, Action levels for poisonous or deleterious substances in human food and animal feed,

[7] Environmental Protection Agency, Pesticides: Health and Safety, Pesticides and Food:
What the Pesticide Residue Limits are on Food,

[8] US Department of Agriculture, The National list of allowed and prohibited substances,