

# When Should You Buy Organic?

by Dr. Jane Pentz

The demand for organic foods has grown from \$178 million in 1980, to \$1 billion in 1990, reached \$3.5 billion by 1996, and is now an \$11 billion industry. Why are so many of us switching to organic? The number one reason stated is concern over pesticides. Currently more than 400 chemicals can be used in conventional farming. Recent studies have shown possible links between these chemicals and certain types of cancer. So buying organic makes sense - especially for those of us concerned about the health effects of pesticides on our children, and grandchildren.



**But if you are like me, you wonder if foods are truly organic and if the additional cost is really worth it.**

The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA), passed by Congress in 1990 was intended to establish national standards for organic foods and a system of mandatory certification and Federal oversight to ensure truth in labeling of organic products. A final rule - National Organic Program (NOP) - was published in 2003, after a period of public review and comment, under the direction of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), an arm of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

**The final rule includes requirements for labeling products as “certified organic” and “containing organic ingredients”.**

## **Items labeled “certified organic”:**

- > Can not be genetically modified or irradiated;
- > Produce cannot be farmed with most synthetic pesticides or fertilizers;
- > Organic dairy, poultry, meat and eggs are produced without growth hormones and antibiotics.
- > Items labeled “certified organic” must pass a clearly defined certification process by federal agents and can contain the following statement on the label: “Certified organic by \_\_\_\_” or similar phrase, followed by the name of the Certifying Agent.

## **Items labeled “containing organic ingredients” must adhere to the following guidelines:**

- > Items labeled “100% organic” must contain only organic ingredients and may display the USDA seal.
- > Items labeled “Organic” must contain at least 95% organic ingredients and these products may also display the USDA seal.
- > Products labeled “Made with organic ingredients” must contain at least 70% organic ingredients. These products **MAY NOT** use the USDA organic seal.
- > Products that contain less than 70% organic ingredients can list the ingredients as organic but cannot be labeled “organic”.

It's also important to read the codes on produce. Those tiny stickers contain a numerical “PLU” code. If the code begins with 9 it's organic; if it begins with 4 it was conventionally grown; and if it begins with an 8 it was genetically engineered.



None of this means that organic food is always your best or smartest buy, according to Consumers Union and other independent researchers. Sometimes it may be worth the extra cost to buy organic, other times it might be beneficial - not essential, and there are times when it's simply a waste of money.

According to Consumers Union, the best bets to buy organic include: apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, red raspberries, spinach and strawberries. These foods, known as the "dirty-dozen" carry much higher levels of pesticide residue. Consumers Union also says it's worth the extra money to buy organic beef, poultry, eggs and dairy products because you will avoid ingesting supplemental hormones and antibiotics. Only marginally beneficial to buy organic is: asparagus, avocados, bananas, broccoli, cauliflower, sweet corn, kiwi, mangos, onions, papaya, pineapples, and sweet peas because multiple pesticide residues are rarely found on these foods.

So when is it a waste of money to buy organic? Again, according to Consumers Union, buying organic foods that aren't good for you in the first place doesn't make them healthy (potato chips, etc.) And don't bother buying organic seafood. The USDA has not developed organic certification

standards for seafood. Wild or farmed fish can be labeled "organic" despite the presence of mercury, PCBs and other contaminants.

**For more information visit:**

[www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP) USDA National Organic Program

[www.ams.usda.gov/nosh](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nosh) National Organic Standards Board

[www.consumersunion.org](http://www.consumersunion.org) Consumers Union



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