

EARTH TALK™

Questions & Answers About Our Environment



Dear EarthTalk: There's been a lot of coverage on the topic of organic foods and how they aren't actually any healthier than conventional foods. Is this true?

—Gina Thompson, Salem, OR

There is no doubt that organic foods are healthier—for our bodies individually as well as for the environment—than their conventionally produced counterparts. The question is how much healthier and does the difference warrant spending more on your grocery bill.

Conventional food is produced using synthetic chemical inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, hormones and antibiotics to repel pests, boost growth and improve the yield of marketable product. It stands to reason that trace amounts of these chemicals are likely to get ingested into our bodies.

Before such chemicals became widely available, most food was produced organically. Recent awareness about the dangers of synthetic chemicals and antibiotic resistance has triggered a renewed interest in organic food.

As a result organic farms constitute the fastest growing sector of the U.S. agriculture industry. Given that these farms are smaller and have more of a niche clientele, they must charge more for organic products. These costs get passed on to consumers willing to spend extra to be healthy.

But after surveying over 200 other studies comparing organic and conventional foods and in some cases their effects on the body, Stanford medical researchers found results to be marginal.

While eating organic produce can lower exposure to pesticides, the amount measured from conventionally grown produce was also well within safety limits.

They also found that organic foods were not particularly more nutritious than non-organic foods. The findings were published in the Annals of Internal Medicine in September 2012.

The one area where the team found a divergence was regarding antibiotic-resistant germs in meats.

While the chances of bacterial contamination are the same for organic

and non-organic meats, germs in conventionally raised chicken and pork had a 33 percent higher risk of being resistant to multiple antibiotics.

Many farmers and ranchers rely on antibiotics to fatten up their animals and keep them healthy until slaughter, but converting to more organic meat could help stem the oncoming tide of antibiotic resistance that threatens to make many of our medicines obsolete.

Of course, consumers may opt for organic foods despite the lack of much difference in nutritional content or chemical residues.

According to the Mayo Clinic, a non-profit medical care and research institution and a leading voice on public health and health maintenance, some people simply prefer the taste of organic food.

Others like organic food because it doesn't typically contain preservatives, artificial sweeteners, coloring and flavorings.

Meanwhile, others take a longer-term view and go organic for the sake of the environment, as organic agriculture reduces pollution and conserves water and soil quality. If you're trying to be both healthy and frugal, selectively buying organic is one option.

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) publishes its *Shoppers Guide to Pesticides in Produce* each year to let consumers know which produce have the most pesticide residues and are the most important to buy organic.

EWG's 2012 "dirty dozen" non-organic foods to avoid were apples, celery, sweet bell peppers, peaches, strawberries, imported nectarines, grapes, spinach, lettuce, cucumbers, blueberries and potatoes.

Contacts: "Are Organic Foods Safer or Healthier than Conventional Alternatives?" <http://annals.org/article.aspx?articleid=1355685>; Environmental Working Group, www.ewg.org.

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Faith Cadonau and Brady McKinnon enjoy hunting for Easter eggs at Alpenrose Dairy, 6149 SW Shattuck Rd. Alpenrose is celebrating their 51st annual Easter Egg Hunt. This event will take place on Saturday, March 30, with chocolate eggs, toys, candy, prizes and best of all there will be 14 six-foot grand prize Easter bunnies. The excitement begins at 10:30 a.m. for kids ages 3-5 and at noon for children ages 6-8. (Photo courtesy of Alpenrose Dairy)

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