

Module 11, Lesson 2 Handout:

Organic Review

In TNS Level 1, we covered Organic Foods and Other Labels in depth in a Webinar 6 Handout. Let's review organic standards here, and you can refer back to the Level 1 handout for even more information on other labels.

Definition of Organic

The word “organic” refers to the way farmers grow and process fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy and meat. To be certified organic, all produce must be grown without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. Meat, poultry, eggs, or dairy products labeled organic are free of antibiotics or growth hormones. Regulations require that all organic foods be processed without irradiation (when food is treated with a small amount of radiation to eliminate germs and parasites) or prohibited chemical food additives, and they can't be grown from genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The term “organic” is regulated by the USDA, so true organic food has the green USDA label.

Organic beef comes from cows that are allowed to roam and graze pastures for at least 120 days of the year (which means they're eating grass on those days); are given fresh air, water and sunshine; and eat 100% organic feed (usually a mix of organic grains like barley and oats, corn, alfalfa meal and vitamin and mineral supplements) without growth-promoting hormones, antibiotics, GMOs or animal by-products (including manure, same-animal meat and bone meal.) The USDA also requires the production and processing of organic beef to meet environmental and ethical standards for sustainability.

Organic milk comes from cows that are held to the exact same standards as cows raised for organic beef. They have year-round access to the outdoors, are never given growth hormones or antibiotics, and are fed only organic feed and grass from the pasture. Non-organic dairy products often come from cows treated with growth hormones.

When poultry is labeled “organic,” it means that what the birds ate was organic: only organic feed (usually made from corn, alfalfa, wheat and vitamin and mineral supplements) that was grown without artificial fertilizers or pesticides and of course no GMOs. The birds were also never treated with growth hormones or antibiotics (though they may have received vaccinations to prevent common diseases, and note that *no* poultry receives hormones in the United States, organic or not) and always had reasonable access to the outdoors.

For eggs, the USDA organic seal refers to the way the hens who laid the eggs are kept and fed. The seal verifies that “producers met animal health and welfare standards, did not use antibiotics or growth hormones, used 100% organic feed, and provided animals with access to the outdoors,” although the amount of time and quality of access isn’t specified. It also doesn’t specify what the feed is, just that it’s organic, so it’s probably a mix of organic grains, not grass. Remember, grass is where the most nutrients are.

The seafood industry does not have a regulated label for organic fish because not all fish can be held to the same standards. It would be pretty tough to completely control the natural environment in the ocean. You may still see “organic” on seafood labels, but it’s not regulated by the USDA like other foods are. Labels that say “organic farm raised” mean the fish was raised on a farm, given organic feed, not exposed to pesticides or chemicals, and wasn’t genetically altered. But because wild fish can’t possibly be held to these standards, the USDA doesn’t recognize any fish as organic and the label probably came from a private company.

When it comes to packaged foods, it’s all about the ingredients list. Organic products will have an organic ingredients list.

Certification

Before a product earns the label, a certifier must inspect the farm where the food is grown and make sure it meets all standards. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to supermarkets or restaurants have to be certified too. Keep in mind that this is a voluntary (and expensive) process, so sometimes smaller producers like local farms can actually be organic but not have the official seal. Unfortunately, there are also small producers that call themselves organic when they actually are not. They should not use the word or the seal. If shopping at a farmers market, take the opportunity to speak with the farmer or representative about growing practices. In a grocery store, the produce manager can help you and answer any questions.

USDA Organic Seal Standards

- 100% Organic: made of only organic ingredients (allowed to display seal)
- Organic: at least 95% organic, but not necessarily 100% organic (allowed to display seal)
- Made with Organic Ingredients: at least 70% of ingredients are certified organic (not allowed to display seal but can list organic ingredients on front of package)
- Contains Organic Ingredients: less than 70% organic ingredients (not allowed to display seal but may list organic ingredients in ingredients list)

What to Recommend

Organic food will be the safest for both you and the environment, and often the most nutritious option for your body. To be fair, there are a few studies that show organic produce doesn't always have more nutrition than conventional produce - nutrient content is affected by so many other factors like geography, soil and climate - but some studies do point to organic food as the more nutritious option, and absolutely better for the environment.

When it comes to nutrition, studies have found higher amounts of vitamin C in organic spinach, lettuce and chard versus the conventional leafy greens; and research has shown higher levels of phenols, a type of antioxidant, in organic fruits and vegetables. In general, organic fruits and vegetables are higher in phytochemicals than their conventional counterparts because these compounds help protect the plant, and organic plants need to work a little harder because they aren't protected by conventional methods. Research confirms that organic dairy products have significantly higher protein and omega-3 fatty acids than conventional dairy and have a higher omega-3 to omega-6 ratio.

Beef might be the most important protein to buy organic because non-organic cattle can be given growth hormones and antibiotics (on the other hand, even non-organic poultry is never given growth hormones, though you should still opt for organic.) Growth hormones like estrogen, testosterone, or steroids are often given to non-organic cattle to speed up muscle growth, while antibiotics are used to keep animals healthy. There is a strong connection between some of the estrogen-like hormones given to cattle and cancer in humans, particularly breast cancer, and eating beef with antibiotics may lead to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in people.

Organic food also offers many other benefits for the environment and your body. Buying organic helps preserve the environment and keeps ethical/sustainable practices in your food supply. Aim to buy organic meat, dairy and produce and always wash produce before you eat it even if it is organic. If you can't get everything organic, narrow it down to the Dirty Dozen.