



ORGANIC FOODS: ARE THEY HEALTHIER?

Ever wonder what's this fuss over organic foods? The term organic usually refers to the way in which farmers grow and process their agriculture produce, such as meats, fruits, vegetables, grains and dairy products. Organic foods are foods that are grown without chemical or genetic modification.

During organic farming animals are allowed to graze and move about freely and feed on organic plants that have neither pesticides nor fertilizers. As a result the animals produce leaner cuts of meat due to the ability to roam freely. In conventional farming animals are placed in a confined area which limits their mobility thereby causing more fat to be developed in the meat. In the raising of animals under organic

farming practices, no hormones or antibiotics are to be used in an effort to alter the animal's biological features; rather healthy practices are employed to foster good health of the animals. These measures are necessary in order to process organic meats which

eliminate the use of synthetic, chemical or artificial preservative such as sodium nitrate that has the potential of being harmful when ingested by human. Below are notable differences between Organic and Non-organic Foods.

Organic Foods	Non-Organic Foods
Apply natural fertilizers, such as manure or composite to feed soil and plants.	Apply chemical fertilizer to promote plant growth.
Use beneficial insects and birds mating disruption or traps to reduce pest and disease.	Spray insecticides to reduce pest and disease.
Rotate crops, till hand weed or mulch to manage weeds.	Use chemical herbicides to manage weeds.
Give animals organic feed and allow them access to outdoors. Use preventive measure such as rotational grazing, balanced diet and clean housing to minimize disease.	Give animals antibiotics, growth hormones and medications to prevent disease and spur growth.

Organic production is managed with the intent of integrating cultural, biological and mechanical practices to promote the cycling of resources. It also promotes ecological balance and biodiversity. These practices also help to protect the soil, groundwater, provide health promoting conditions for animals and ultimately help promote the health of the consumer.

Classification and Labelling

Some governments have developed strict guidelines to which farmers must adhere to have their produce marked as organic. The standards established seek to regulate how organic foods are grown, handled and processed. The list of specifications only allow for five percent (5%) of the produce to have any influence of conventional farming. In order for a farmer to have his produce certified as organic, the soil must be free from any pesticides. Pesticides on average take three years to be removed from the soil. Plants must be grown naturally without the manipulation of genetically modified enhancements and animals are not to be fed organically grown feed. The guidelines further prohibit the use of synthetic fertilizers, sewer sludge fertilizers, growth hormones, irradiation, antibiotics and artificial ingredients. Of course with all these stringent guidelines one

might ask how is a farmer able to comply with these standards?

Regularly, consumers mix organic with all-natural, free range and hormone-free products. These are not organic forms of food, as there has been some form of conventional production done to them. Organic foods come in three different forms:

1. 100 percent organic products that are totally organically made.
2. Organic normally 95 percent of the food is organic.
3. Made with organic ingredients these normally do not carry a seal as only 70 percent is organic and often-times the organic food is coupled with non-organic food items.

What to Buy

So you are now left with the decision to buy or not to buy. There is no conclusive evidence to indicate that organic foods **taste** better than non-organic. Some consumers however say that it does taste better, but that is a matter of personal preference. There is also no scientific data which supports the theory that organic foods have superior **nutritive value** than non-organic foods. However there are cases in which plants have been genetically modified to enhance their nutritive values.

The **quality** and **appearance** of organic foods may vary due to the fact that they are not treated with wax or preservatives. With

non-organic the focus is on streamlining consistency in shape, size and colour. Organic is not overly concerned with these specifics but rather allowing the plants and animals to be groomed and tamed by nature. By doing this plants are able to develop character. Experts argue that this character allows phytochemicals to be produced. Phytochemicals are chemical compounds found in plants, fruits, and vegetables that can act as antioxidants.

Most organic food **cost** more than non-organic food products. Higher prices are as a result of more expensive farming practices, tighter government regulations and lower crop yields. Because organic farmers do not use herbicides or pesticides, many management tools that control weeds and pest are labour intensive. For example organic growers may hand weed vegetables to control weeds, and consequently consumers end up paying more for these vegetables.

Things to Ponder

Many food producers see organic food production as time consuming and labour intensive with some degree of difficulty in addressing the world's growing population and issues of food shortages that are faced by some countries. The Caribbean's current population is approximately 6 million. Of the thousands of farmers that exist only a small percentage practice

organic farming. As a result the probability demand in relation to supply is great hence the current high price associated with organic foods.

It is important to note that 'organic' does not necessarily spell healthier as these foods may be high in sugar, salt, fat and calories. Foods that have a

high concentration of fat, sugar, etc. will always have those contents because that is how they occur, e.g. ackee. What organic foods do is to provide a better and safer alternative to food production and cultivation.

The undisputed fact about organic foods is that they do

provide some answer to our environmental concerns and seek to promote natural and perceived healthier living with well known results unlike non-organic where the quantification of their long-term effects are still being studied.

Source: Organic Foods: Are the safer? More nutritious? [www.mayoclinic.com/health/organic food/NU00255](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/organic-food/NU00255). Accessed February 2008.
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For further information contact:

Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute
UWI Campus, P.O. Box 140, Kingston 7
Jamaica, W.I.

Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute
UWI Campus, St. Augustine
Trinidad, W.I.

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