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THE BIG “O”

A pepper is a pepper is a pepper, right? Not always. Here, a complete look at the pros and cons of going organic.

BY MINDY HERMANN, R.D.

you're strolling down the produce aisle in your supermarket, armed with your shopping list of fruits and veggies, knowing that they're the ticket to helping you lose weight, as well as preventing a multitude of diseases. You eye the colorful rows of peppers, apples, lettuce, and beans. Then, with trusty basket in hand, you reach the section labeled "organic." The price of the organic veggies and fruits is higher than their nonorganic counterparts. You want to buy organic but you redirect your cart back to the nonorganic section.

From their first appearance in health-food stores in the early 1970s, organic foods were considered as much a political statement as a health one. Today, scan the aisles in your market and you'll see everything from organic veggies to chicken to cookies. In fact, according to the Food Marketing Institute, nearly half of consumers say they purchase organic products at least once a month. The trend toward organic foods continues to spur the growth of organic superstores around the country; even supermarkets are devoting entire aisles to organic produce, packaged goods, dairy products, and meats. In the year 2000, Americans spent almost \$8 billion dollars on organic foods, according to the Natural Marketing Institute, and some experts predict that sales will top \$20 billion by 2005.

Clearly, organic has gone mainstream. What's more, the industry's credibility and popularity were severely

boosted last year with the long-awaited implementation of nationwide organic standards by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). But the fact remains, many consumers are still confused by what the term "organic" actually means, and experts continue to debate whether organic foods are worth the extra few bucks. Naysayers claim that organic products are no healthier, nutritious, or better tasting than conventional ones. Organic aficionados contend that fresher taste, as well as environmental and health concerns, is reason enough for consumers to fill their shopping carts with organic foods. Planet-friendly food or overpriced produce? Here, a look at our take on the best way to decode the debate.

What does "organic" really mean?

Until recently, the term "organic" meant different things in different states. A food labeled "organic" in one state might contain nonorganic ingredients or have been grown in standard soil, while that same food in another state may have been labeled "made with organic ingredients." But new government standards put an end to labeling confusion and introduced consistency from state to state. Organic means that a food is produced using no prohibited materials like chemical pesticides, sewage sludge (as in fertilizer), radiation, preservatives, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Before crops are transitioned to be farmed under the recently established organic rules, farm soil must be free of all these sub-

(cont. on page 60)

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(cont. from page 58)

stances for at least three years. And organically raised animals can't contain GMOs or be given any hormones or antibiotics. Strictly organic foods are labeled "100 percent organic," foods that are at least 95 percent organic are marked "organic," and foods that are at least 70 percent organic are labeled "made with organic ingredients."

Are organic foods more nutritious?

Almost two-thirds of Americans believe that organic products are healthier and more nutritious than nonorganic, according to the *Organic Lifestyle Shopper Study 2000* conducted by the Hartman Group, a market research firm. But you may be surprised to learn that organic foods are not always more nutritious. For example, organic frozen dinners, cookies, snack foods, and ice creams can have just as much fat and calories as their nonorganic counterparts.

When it comes to fruits and vegetables, "there are too many variables to make the claim that organic is more nutritious than conventional produce," says Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, a nonprofit organization that fosters the improvement and adoption of organic farming practices. "Factors like where the produce was purchased, whether you're cooking the produce, and how long it sits in the refrigerator drawer can all alter nutrition content," says Scowcroft.

Freshness matters more than anything else, agrees Liz Marr, R.D., a Colorado-based consultant to the organic-food industry. For example, a fresh head of non-organic broccoli will supply more vitamins than the organic broccoli that has been sitting around longer. "Buying fruits and vegetables in season is the best way to

Freshen Up!

The Environmental Working Group (EWG), a nonprofit environmental organization, compiled a list of produce with the most pesticide residue. To limit the amount of pesticides you're exposed to, consider buying these fruits and veggies organic:

- Apples
- Apricots
- Bell Peppers
- Cantaloupe (Mexico)
- Celery
- Cherries (USA)
- Cucumbers
- Grapes (Chile)
- Green Beans
- Peaches
- Spinach
- Strawberries

ensure freshness and boost your nutrition intake," says Marr. "So enjoy farm-fresh apples in October, asparagus in March, and berries in the summer months."

Are there health benefits to going organic?

So far, the research has not proven an overall health benefit to eating an organic-based diet. "One of the best ways to eat for health is to include plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in your diet, whether they're conventionally grown or organically grown," says Barbara Gollman, R.D., a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Certainly, eating organic foods may limit your exposure to potentially harmful pesticides and other compounds. But the government already sets limits for the amount of pesticide residue that is allowed to be present on fruits and vegetables that are sold in markets in the United States. And, in fact, the majority of conventionally grown produce in this country has little

pesticide residue.

Not surprisingly, many in the organic industry don't agree with this take on the issue. "You can't get rid of all the pesticides by washing your produce—they're absorbed into fruits and vegetables," says Myra Goodman, cofounder and executive vice president of Earthbound Farm, a national organic-produce brand. "It's somewhat of a comfort to know if you're consuming a lot of produce, by eating organic you're less likely to be exposed to pesticide residue."

Does organic farming help the environment?

One issue many experts do agree on is that organically grown crops are better for our environment. "The more organic farms, the less pollution and water contamination we will have," says Scowcroft. "Although not all chemicals used in conventional farming are carcino-

gens, they're not allowed in organic production and are not building up in our food chains."

Are organic foods worth the extra cost?

The number one reason people shy away from buying organic is the price, according to *Fresh Trends 2002*, a survey of 1,000 fresh-produce consumers. "My hope is that prices will come down as more stores stock organic foods and as it becomes more popular," says Marr. If you've considered buying organic and cost is a concern, start small. "If you start buying organic produce, you will do your family a service," adds Scowcroft. "It's really cost-effective when you consider you're preventing contamination, pesticide usage, and ground-water pollution."

Goodman suggests taking the foods you eat a lot and rotating between buying conventional and organic. In other words, don't think

of going organic as an all-or-nothing proposition. "A great analogy is recycling. Even if you do half of what you're supposed to, it still helps," says Goodman.

What does the future hold for organic foods?

One thing is clear: There will soon be a burst of organic products available to consumers far beyond the realm of produce. In particular, organic milk, poultry, and pork will take supermarkets by storm. We're also likely to see supermarkets producing their own lines of organic products and large chains carrying organic products.

The choice to buy organic or not is obviously your own. Just as with every food choice you make, the important thing to remember is to eat healthy: Consume lots of fruits and veggies, and consider carefully how to make that goal feasible for you and your family. **W**

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