

When to Buy Organic

By Rebecca Morley, MA

Every time you shop for produce you face the decision, organic or conventional. We want to eat foods that promote our health while still keeping our food budgets under control. Organic foods, while they may reduce exposure to pesticides and other possible toxins, are generally more expensive than conventional foods. Is it possible to eat organic and keep our budgets healthy?

Prioritize your organic produce choices using this rule of thumb: **If you plan to eat the skin, buy organic!** Foods with edible skins like strawberries, apples, grapes, lettuce, spinach or tomatoes tend to absorb more pesticides. However foods like bananas, onions, pineapples, corn, and avocados have very little pesticide residue to begin with, so buying conventional makes very little difference.

According to a 2009 Organic Trade Association survey, [sales of organic food in the US have grown by almost 16 percent](#) in 2008 over 2007, totaling \$22.9 billion in 2008 sales. Although only 3.5 % of the total US food sales, it proves that Americans are becoming more interested in health and environmental concerns as factors in considering their decision to purchase foods labeled organic.



Organic produce has been regulated by the USDA's National Organic Program since 2002. Under organic production, the use of conventional non-organic pesticides, insecticides and herbicides is greatly restricted and saved as a last resort. However, contrary to popular belief, they are not always completely pesticide-free and certain non-organic fertilizers are still used. If livestock are involved, they must be reared without the routine use of antibiotics and without the use of growth hormones and generally fed a healthy diet. In the US, organic produce may not be genetically modified.



Nutritionally speaking there is some [controversy](#) about whether organic foods might be superior to conventional foods. [Results of studies are mixed](#), but an absolute is that a healthy diet means variety, balance, and portion, regardless of the farming method that produced the food.

There are many reasons for buying organic. There are certainly environmental reasons to go organic and organic foods do not contain any additives or preservatives. The higher costs are related to more labor intensive methods and lower crop yields. While conventional farmers tend to use every acre available for planting, organic farmers rotate their crops to keep soil healthy. All these factors add up to higher costs. That is why in order to balance your health and your budget, it makes sense to spend the bulk of your organic budget on the higher risk categories of foods that you most frequently eat.