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Are Organic Foods Better Than Conventional Foods?

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Organic foods are appearing in stores with greater regularity. As a result, it's important to understand what's meant by the term "organic." On a food label, organic means that the food has been produced with approved methods. For instance, the methods of production can't involve synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation or genetic engineering. A food label that carries an organic seal from the US Department of Agriculture means that the product is certified as organic and at least 95% of its content is organic.

As the number of organic foods has increased, so has the amount of money that's spent on purchasing those items. In 2010, Americans spent an estimated 26.7 billion dollars on organic foods. This represents a whopping 642% increase in what was spent in 1997.

Organic foods can cost twice as much or more than comparable conventional foods. But even though organic foods are more expensive than conventional foods, many people don't seem to mind paying a higher price for foods that they think are healthier and nutritious. But are organic foods really better than conventional foods when it comes to nutritional value?

In a 2009 review, researchers in the United Kingdom examined 55 studies that were deemed to be of satisfactory quality. The studies analyzed 100 different foods and presented data on 455 nutrients and relevant substances that the researchers grouped into 98 nutrient categories.

It was found that conventional foods are comparable to organic foods in terms of nutrient content. In other words, conventional foods are just as nutritious as organic foods.

In a 2012 review, researchers in California examined 223 studies of food that were deemed to be of fair quality. This included 153 studies of fruits, vegetables and grains along with 71 studies of meats, poultry, milk and eggs. (One study investigated both types of foods).

It was found that conventional foods are comparable to organic foods in terms of vitamin content. Only two nutrients were significantly higher in organic foods than conventional foods: phosphorus and total phenols. However, most people get adequate amounts of phosphorus from a normal intake of foods; the data on total phenols were garnered from a small number of samples and, therefore, must be interpreted with caution. So, again, conventional foods are just as nutritious as organic foods.

Not to be overlooked, of course, is the fact that organic foods control the use of chemicals in crop production (such as herbicides and pesticides) and medicines in animal production (such as antibiotics and growth hormones). In the studies that were reviewed by the researchers in California, for example, detectable residues of pesticides were found in 7% of organic produce and 38% of conventional produce. Nonetheless, in most cases, the concentrations of pesticides were within safe levels. (Studies of meats, poultry, eggs and milk didn't look at pesticide levels.)

In that same study, there were no significant differences in the prevalence of bacterial contamination between organic foods and conventional foods.

Bottom line: There's no scientific evidence that organic foods are more nutritious than conventional foods.

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