

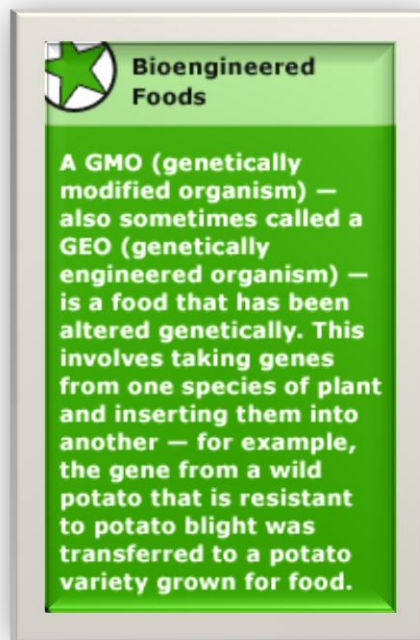
Organic Foods for Better Health

Even the most casual food shoppers have probably noticed the increased quantity and variety of organic foods available in regular grocery stores. Once the specialty of health food stores, organic foods are spreading from specialty aisles to shelves throughout the big food stores.

Maybe you're wondering what all the fuss is about. Are organic foods healthier? Are they safer? Are they worth the extra money if they cost more than conventional foods? How do they taste?

And what about those labels touting foods as "sustainable," "natural," "free-range," "grass-fed," or "fair trade"? What do they mean, and are those foods organic, too?

Read on for a crash course in organic and other environmentally friendly foods.



Defining "Organic"

If a food is labeled "organic," what does that mean? To meet the organic standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), an organic food is one that is grown without:

pesticides

fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge

herbicides

antibiotics

bioengineering

hormones

ionizing radiation

Organic animal products — meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy foods — come from animals that are fed 100% organic feed products, receive no antibiotics or growth hormones, and have access to the outdoors.

If a product is labeled "organic," it means that a government-approved certifier has inspected the farm where it was produced to ensure that the farmer followed all the rules necessary to meet the USDA's organic standards. Farmers who produce organic foods use renewable resources that conserve the soil and water for future generations. And any company that handled or processed that food on its way to the grocery store must be certified organic, too.

Foods labeled "organic" can be either:

100% organic: They're completely organic or made of all organic ingredients.

Organic: They're at least 95% organic.

If you see "made with organic ingredients" on a label, it means the food contains at least 70% organic ingredients, but can't have the "organic" seal on its packaging.

Sustainable Foods

Another term you might hear in conjunction with organic and natural foods is "sustainable." This movement encourages eating foods grown locally by sustainable agricultural methods — that is, using

food-growing techniques that don't harm the environment, are seasonal, and preserve agricultural land. Sustainable practices also are humane to animals, pay growers fairly, and support local farming communities by distributing their food through farmer's markets and other venues.

Again, "sustainable" and "organic" don't always mean the same thing. An organic tomato you buy, for example, might not adhere to sustainable principles if it was grown organically but shipped across the country to your market. And some produce you find at your local stand might not have been grown organically.

There's a growing trend among health-conscious consumers to buy food that is both sustainable and organic whenever possible.

You Might Also See:

Bird Friendly or Shade Grown: When you see this on coffee, it means it was grown under trees that provide shade for the coffee and a habitat for migratory birds. Coffee grown out in the open under the hot sun is cheaper but requires more pesticides and chemical fertilizers to grow.

Grass-Fed/Open Pasture: "Grass-fed" on a label signifies that the livestock received a diet of natural forage outdoors, but sometimes cows are fed grass while indoors or in a pen or only for the first few months of their lives. So "grass-fed" can — but doesn't always — mean "pasture-raised" or "open pasture." Pasture-raised animals roam freely outdoors where they can eat the grasses and other plants that their bodies are best suited to digest.

Marine Stewardship Council: If you see this on your package of fish sticks or Alaskan salmon, it means the seafood was caught without endangering the species or harming the local ecosystem.

Natural Foods

Natural foods are foods that are minimally processed and remain as close as possible to their whole, original state. Natural foods don't have to adhere to the same rigorous standards organic foods do. However, the term "natural" generally means a product has no artificial ingredients or preservatives and that meat or poultry is minimally processed and free of artificial ingredients.

Natural foods can be organic, but not all are — some natural foods, for instance, may have been produced on a farm that has not been certified organic. If you want to be sure that what you're eating is organic, look for the "organic" labeling, which means they've been certified as meeting the USDA's standards.

Is Organic Food Healthier?

While the USDA does not claim that organic foods are safer or more nutritious than those produced conventionally, many people who produce, buy, and eat organic foods believe that they are.

Fans of organic foods are buying more and more of it — sales have risen more than 20% every year in the past decade and the Food Marketing Institute says that more than half of Americans buy organic food at least once a month.

Even with organic products, though, be sure to follow the safe handling recommendations for all foods:

Thoroughly wash all produce, and if the skin still isn't clean, peel it off.

Organically raised and processed meat can harbor bacteria and should be handled the same as regular meat products — follow kitchen cleanliness rules and cook meats to the proper temperature: 180° for poultry, 160° for beef.

Where to Buy Organic Foods

It wasn't so long ago that people who wanted to buy primarily organic foods had to turn to their local food co-ops or settle for a few items in their grocery store. Co-ops are still a great source for natural and organic foods. But prices might be higher, and anyone looking for non-natural foods as well will have to make another stop.

These days, though, it's easy to find a well-rounded selection of organic products. Most groceries offer organic produce, juices, cereals, baby food, dairy products, and more. And many stores are 100% organic or natural — if you don't have one in your neighborhood, there's likely to be one a short drive away.

If you can't find a decent selection of organic foods where you shop, talk to the store manager. The more requests a store gets for natural selections, the more likely it is to stock them.

Mmm, Mmm, Organic

If you think of cardboard-y bread, weird vegetables, and unconvincing fake meat when you think of organic foods, think again! It's not a world of bland tofu and alfalfa sprouts. Many world-class beef producers are organic, and some of the best chocolate and coffee you'll ever try are organically made.

So the next time you see a tempting treat that's labeled "organic," you may want to give it a try — it might be your first step toward a style of shopping and eating that's good for you and the planet.