

# Can Organic Food Labels Be Trusted?

As the organic food industry grows in popularity, so does the debate on whether or not organic food labels can be trusted. Another frequently asked question is whether or not organic foods are better than conventionally grown foods. To answer these questions and more, Dubai - based fitness and health expert **Bernadette Abraham** sheds some important light on the current food industry and the latest scientific findings. Warning – the following information may shock you!

## Is Organic Food Better?

Despite the many disputes from so called "health experts" that claim there are no differences between organic and conventionally grown foods, there are numerous researches and studies that prove otherwise. Furthermore, if a food is grown in healthy soil, using plant-based fertilizers, and is free of pesticides, chemicals, hormones, or genetic modification, common sense should prevail that it is more nutritious. Personal thoughts aside, let the results from a five-year study funded by the European Union called the Quality Low Input Food (QLIF) project speak for itself. The study showed that organic food production methods resulted in higher levels of nutritionally desirable compounds such as vitamins, antioxidants, and essential fats Omega-3 and CLA, and lower levels of nutritionally undesirable compounds such as heavy metals, mycotoxins, pesticide residues and glycol-alkaloids in a range of crops and/or milk. More specifically, they found that organic produce contained up to 40% more antioxidants and had higher levels of beneficial minerals like iron and zinc. Milk from organic herds also contained up to 90% more antioxidants.

## Organic Does Not Always Mean Healthy

While there is no question about the nutritional benefits

of organic foods, the debate of whether or not consumers are being ripped off is a great concern. How is it possible for a consumer to know if the organic food meets the highest quality and farming standards? Unfortunately, as is the case with the current multi-billion dollar health and fitness industry, there are many big companies thriving on this growing trend and are compromising on ethical and moral standards for the sake of profits. Organic sales in the United States alone reached \$24.6 billion in sales in 2008 with an estimated 18 percent growth rate every year! Unfortunately, the result is an equally fast decline in the quality and trust in the organic label.

The biggest scams are the organic labels found on unhealthy food options. For example, a bag of fried potato chips or crisps are unhealthy regardless if the potatoes are organic. Ice cream, cookies, and sugary cereals are still junk foods no matter what the label says. The clever marketing is meant to make consumers feel less guilty about eating junk food because it is "organic". Don't be fooled!

## So Which Organic Label Can We Trust?

It is important to recognize that not all countries have government regulated organic standards. In countries without organic laws, organic certification is handled by



certifying agencies, such as non-profit organizations and private companies that act on behalf of the government. This can lead to major discrepancies in the certification standards and quality. The best way to ensure quality and safety is to research the standards of local organic farms and select foods that come from countries that have more stringent laws. The USDA (United States), JAS (Japan), QAAS (Quebec, Canada), and the European Union (for which a logo has not yet been determined) are amongst the countries that regulate organic foods at a legislative level.

### The Dirty Dozen & Clean 15

The Environmental Working Group in the U.S. is a non-profit organization aimed at protecting public health and the environment. They have developed a guide based on data from nearly 87,000 tests for pesticide residues in produce. The Dirty Dozen is a list of 12 fruits and vegetables that were found to contain the most pesticides. They have also come up with a list called the Clean 15, which include the safest conventionally grown fruits and

vegetables. So if the cost of buying organic produce is a concern, then select a few items from the Dirty Dozen to minimize the consumption of pesticides.

Here in the UAE, there is a wonderful organic farm called Nazwa Organic Farm. Their store in Umm Suqeim will soon be opening their doors and consumers will be able to purchase freshly picked organic produce and eggs that taste the way food used to taste. For more information, email [ElenaKinane@googlemail.com](mailto:ElenaKinane@googlemail.com).

The Dirty Dozen	The Clean 15
1. Peach (most pesticides)	1. Onion
2. Apple	2. Avocado
3. Sweet Bell Pepper	3. Sweet Corn – Frozen
4. Celery	4. Pineapple
5. Nectarine	5. Mango
6. Strawberries	6. Asparagus
7. Cherries	7. Sweet Peas – Frozen
8. Kale	8. Kiwi
9. Lettuce	9. Cabbage
10. Grapes	10. Eggplant
11. Carrot	11. Papaya
12. Pear	12. Watermelon
	13. Broccoli
	14. Tomato
	15. Sweet Potato



farming more productive and affordable. Genetic modification is a very controversial topic as some experts believe GM foods will one day be able to cure diseases, while critics claim that GM foods will cause health and environmental problems.

The problem is that most people are unknowingly consuming genetically modified foods on a daily basis since the labeling laws do not require manufacturers to label GM foods. Conventionally grown corn and soy comprise the largest portion of genetically modified crops, followed by cottonseed and canola oil. Corn and soy crops can be made into many other commonly used ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup, corn flour, corn meal, dextrin, starch, soy sauce, margarine, and tofu.

### What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

Choosing locally-grown organic foods as often as possible is without a doubt the best choice for health and environmental reasons. However, it is even more important to be aware of and avoid genetically modified foods and their derivatives. To date, the largest application of genetic modification is patent-protected foods crops that are resistant to commercial herbicides, pesticides, or harsh environmental conditions, with the goal of making

Although the majority of food labels do not list GM foods, there are a few tips that consumers can follow to reduce the amount of GM food consumption.

- 1 Buy organic food. By definition, organic foods should be free of genetically modified organisms.
- 2 Read the product's list of ingredients and avoid any of the corn or soy-based derivatives mentioned earlier.
- 3 Reduce or avoid processed foods altogether. At least 75 percent of processed foods contain GM ingredients, which is one of the many reasons to stick to whole foods.
- 4 Look at the PLU (price look-up) code on the stickers found on produce. Conventionally grown fruits and vegetables have a PLU code of four digits, usually prefaced with the number three, four, or five. Organically grown produce have five numbers prefaced by the number nine, and GM foods have five numbers prefaced by the number eight. For example, a GM fruit would have a PLU sticker written as "86001".
- 5 Use the "True Food Shopping Guide" when shopping for groceries. The True Food Network was established in 2000 to stop genetic engineering of food and farm crops, and to create a socially just, democratic, and sustainable food system. The small guide they have come up with contains a list of manufacturers that use the four major GM crop ingredients in their products: corn, soy, cottonseed oil, and canola oil. Visit [www.truefoodnow.org/shoppers-guide](http://www.truefoodnow.org/shoppers-guide) to get the list.\*

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