



## What does 'organic' really mean?

Given the choice, most people prefer organically grown produce and food products made from organic ingredients. Still, many people only have a vague idea what the term "organic" really means. Understanding the term can help you decide if it is worth it to pay the extra cost of organic foods.

**Question:** Is there a standard for the meaning of "organic"?

**Answer:** Before October 2002 more than 50 private organizations and state agencies had their own standards defining the term. This hodgepodge of criteria led to a great deal of confusion, not only for consumers, but also for those in the food and agriculture industries.

About a year ago the U.S. Department of Agriculture enacted its National Organic Standards, or NOS, program, establishing federal standards that must be met if a food is sold or labeled as organic.

**Q:** What does the USDA organic seal mean?

**A:** USDA NOS regulations define organic food as food grown and processed without

most conventional pesticides, without synthetic chemical fertilizers or sewage sludge, without biotechnology and without ionizing radiation in processing.

The use of some pesticides is allowed. For example, certain botanical or plant-derived substances, such as rotenone, can be used. Insecticidal soaps, horticultural oils and some mineral salts such as sulfur and copper can be used with appropriate practices.

**Q:** How is the term "organic" used on food product labels?

**A:** The term can be used legally on food product labels three ways:

>> "100 percent organic" means all ingredients in the product must be organic.

>> "Organic" means the product must consist of at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients.

>> "Made with organic ingredients" means the product must contain at least 70 percent organically produced ingredients.

A product that contains less than 70 percent organic ingredi-

ents may not use the term "organic" except in the list of ingredients.

**Q:** If a food product is not labeled "organic," does that mean that it was grown with pesticides and synthetic fertilizers?

**A:** No. Conventionally grown foods are not always treated in that manner. For a crop to be identified as organic, the grower must first become a certified organic operation and maintain records required by the NOS program. Some growers may not want to bother with this process even though they are often using growing practices that could qualify as organic.

Major organizations promoting increased consumption of fruits, vegetables and whole grains (such as the American Heart Association, American Cancer Society and the U.S. Surgeon General) all agree that we should all be eating plenty of these foods whether they are organically or conventionally grown.

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