

# Is organic food really better?

The organic farming industry encourages people to overhaul their shopping habits and buy only organic standard food, clothes and other products. But should you really be part of this change, or would you simply be wasting your time? We look at the pros and cons of going organic.



According to Soil Association figures ([soilassociation.org](http://soilassociation.org)), organic food and drink sales passed the £2 billion mark in the UK for the first time in 2006, up 22% on the previous year. Going 'organic' has officially become big business.

There are several reasons behind this rapid increase. First of all, many people believe that organic produce tastes better than food that has been treated with hundreds of chemicals.

Others argue that it prevents illnesses such as asthma and heart disease while some cite animal welfare and protecting the environment as their reason for switching to organic produce.

Organic products are not, however, without their critics, who say that it is too expensive and does not actually offer any proven health benefits. So who should you believe?

## **Pros**

Certifying food as organic requires more than slapping a fancy label on the packaging. Most farmers rely on chemical fertilisers and pesticides; it is estimated that 4.5 billion litres of them are used on crops annually. Organic farming, meanwhile, places strict limits on the 350 pesticides currently in use by farmers under tight governmental scrutiny. And quite right too, if you believe the organic campaigners and health experts who have raised concerns about the long-term effects of these chemicals on our health.

One ten-year study carried out by a research team at the University of California concluded that organic fruit and vegetables may be healthier than conventionally grown

produce. The research team compared organic tomatoes with standard crops and found that the organic tomato contained almost double the level of flavonoids – a powerful antioxidant which is thought to reduce high blood pressure – than the regular tomato.

The team believed that the different level of flavonoids in the tomatoes was most likely due to the absence of pesticides in organic farming methods. Another study in the North of England found that organically grown potatoes, kiwi fruit and carrots contained up to 40% more antioxidants than those that had been conventionally farmed.

Elsewhere, scientists have claimed that organic milk has higher levels of vitamin E, omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants, while Scottish researchers found that organic vegetables contained six times the amount of salicylic acid, which has been linked with a protective effect against heart disease, strokes and cancer.

But organic food and other products are not just potentially good for our health, they are also better for our environment. Buying locally produced organic food supports your local farmer but, because it hasn't been flown half way round the world, is also a much greener way to shop. Organic farming also favours crop rotation, which is a natural way of keeping the soil fertile.

And anyone put off organic food because of the extra cost should remember that a portion of our taxes go towards tackling the pollution of our water supplies by fertilisers and pesticides.

It is better for animals, too. Organic farming requires high standards of animal welfare, while the use of antibiotics is kept to a minimum. Research has also shown that there is a much wider number of wildlife and plants on organic farms.



### **Cons**

Not everyone is convinced that organic food is better for our health. In fact, most people would argue that the evidence is inconclusive. The Food Standards Agency's (FSA) official view is that the current scientific evidence does not show that organic food is safer, healthier or more nutritious than conventional food. The British Government

agrees, arguing that going organic is a lifestyle choice and our main concern should be getting people to eat enough ordinary fruit and vegetables and not telling them that they have to eat organic to get at the real health benefits.

Foreign bodies, such as the French Food Safety Agency and the Swedish National Food Administration, agree, and a report that appeared in *Which?* magazine argued that there is no consensus on the supposed health benefits of eating organic food.

They also argue that some of the studies linking organic food with health benefits are not conclusive and therefore require additional research before any decisive recommendations can be made.

There is also a debate raging about whether organic food actually tastes better. Free-range meat, for example, can taste just as good as organic (though a £2 chicken from the supermarket will taste much, much worse), but how many consumers would really be able to tell the difference between organic and conventional vegetables, eggs or milk?

So, according to some of the world's most influential food watchdogs, paying extra for organic produce is tantamount to wasting money. It costs the farmer more, too. Converting land into an organic farm can take as much as three years and farmers have to adhere to strict guidelines and regulations just to stay certified. Organic food also costs more to produce (organic animal feed, for example, is more expensive), which is why it is more expensive to us.

Finally, there is a reason why farmers use pesticides and fertilisers and organic crops are left exposed to disease. At a time when British farmers are under extreme pressure, this is understandably something they shouldn't have to worry about.

### **The verdict**

More, much more, research needs to be done until we know for sure whether organic food is indeed better for us than conventional produce. However, what we do know for sure is that it is kinder to animals, helps local farmers and protects our fragile environment, so what more proof do you really need?