

Is Eating Organic Food Worth the Cost?

By Dr. Patrick B. Massey, MD, PH.D, Daily Herald Chicago



Is a steady diet of organic food healthier than conventionally grown food?

One half of the argument is that organic food does not contain pesticides and herbicides that may be toxic to humans.

The other half of the argument is that there is no compelling data to indicate that conventionally grown food is inherently unsafe.

Although both of these arguments are accurate, two recent medical studies have demonstrated that the regular consumption of organically grown food may reduce the incidence of one or more cancers.

The definition of organic food varies from country to country. For the United States, the rules and regulations for organic food can be found on the USDA website.

In general, the standards are: no synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, antibiotics, food additives, irradiation and sewage sludge; no genetically modified seeds; farmland free from prohibited chemicals for three or more years; specific requirements for feed, housing, and breeding of livestock; written production and sales records; strict physical separation of organic products from noncertified products; periodic on-site inspections.

A number of studies have demonstrated that conventionally grown foods are seriously contaminated with pesticides and herbicides compared to organically grown food.

The problem with many pesticides and herbicides is that they fall into a group of compounds called endocrine disruptors.

In the short term exposure to small amounts of endocrine disruptors may have no clinical effect. However, there is reasonable research to demonstrate that even a small amounts of an endocrine disruptor over a long period of time increases the risk of serious illnesses including cancer.

The increased demand for organic food has created a multibillion dollar business in the United States as well as Europe.

Organic food is, unfortunately, more expensive than conventionally grown food.

In order for a person to want to spend more money on organic food, there is an expectation of improved health. But the data for health benefits is lacking.

However, some recent studies may be changing that. Two recent medical studies demonstrated reduced risk of cancer in those who regularly eat organic food.

The first study, published in 2014 in the British Journal of Cancer, indicated a reduced risk of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in people who regularly ate organic food. A 2018 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association demonstrated a substantial reduced risk of a number of cancers including breast cancer, prostate cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

It seems like common sense to say that eating organic food is healthier than conventionally grown food. However, the counter-argument has always been that the additives in conventionally grown food did not pose a substantial health risk.

These data were derived by looking for a health risk over a short period of time and not exploring their cumulative effects over years to decades.

From my perspective, anything that can be done to limit the number of toxins in our bodies must have positive, long-term effects.

I try to eat organic meat, vegetables and fruits as often as is possible. I also strongly recommend organic products for all my patients. To me, the cost of cancer far outweighs the cost of organic foods.

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