

What makes food organic?
By: Brittany Dumais, RD, LDN

Organic refers to the way agricultural products are grown and processed. Organic farming emphasizes the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations. Organic produce is grown without using conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering, or ionizing radiation. Livestock is not treated with antibiotics, growth hormones, or genetically modified organisms. Livestock must be kept in living conditions that accommodate natural behavior and must receive 100 percent organic feed.

Before a product can be labeled "organic", a government-approved certifier inspects the farm to make sure the farmer meets the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) organic standards. The standards for certification include: an organic system plan including a 3-year history of what has been applied to the land, and no prohibited substance applied to their land for at least three years prior to harvest. The farm is inspected annually, including unannounced inspections, and residue tests can be performed to verify that contamination with prohibited substances has not occurred.

When purchasing products a food labeled as "100% organic" must be made with 100 percent organic ingredients and there should be a certifying agent seal on the product. The USDA organic seal, however, is voluntary and may or may not appear on the product. If a food is labeled as "organic", at least 95 percent of the ingredients are organic and there should be a certifying agent seal. If a product is labeled as "made with organic ingredients", at least 70 percent of the ingredients are organic and there should be a certifying agent seal.

The USDA makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food; it only differs in the way it is grown, handled and processed. As consumers, we get to decide what we eat.

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