

Search EDB:

[\(Co\)](#)

[Home](#)   [Food Safety](#)   [Nutrition](#)   [Food Production](#)   [Food Law](#)   [Beverages](#)   [Food 101](#)   [Animals](#)



## Natural vs. organic: Which is healthier?

By Carol Patton  
September 29, 2009

Grocery shopping is nothing like it was years ago. So many labels. So much to learn. So many decisions to make when it comes to eating healthy.

While most people understand the nutrition benefits of low fat, low cholesterol or low sodium foods, many become confused about those that are labeled organic or natural. Which is more nutritional?

The answer may surprise you: Neither.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the only criteria for foods labeled "natural" is that they can't contain any artificial ingredients, such as food coloring, artificial sweeteners or flavors. Although unhealthy, bacon can be labeled natural. So can mushrooms even if they were chemically sprayed, grown with pesticides or smothered in lard, which is a natural fat.

Since there aren't any global, stringent standards or even a certification body to regulate natural foods, manufacturers have more wiggle room to label their product natural.

Similar to natural foods, organic foods don't contain artificial ingredients. They also cannot be grown with any chemicals and must meet strict standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture regarding how they are grown, handled and processed.

Natural and nonorganic food can contain small traces of pesticides currently previously used by farmers because of the chemicals that remain in the soil and water. Studies show that pesticides can cause a wide variety of health problems, ranging from birth defects to nerve damage and cancer. But there are "research gaps," according to Cornell University. It is not clear how much pesticide use is considered safe or what the long-term health consequences are for people. Although the federal government carefully regulates pesticide use in nonorganic foods, organic foods are grown without pesticides, giving consumers the option to eat foods that are free of chemicals.

The benefits of organic food also apply to the environment. Organic farming practices improve the fertility of the soil and reduce groundwater contamination from nitrogen and phosphorous fertilizers.

There is no conclusive evidence that proves organic foods are healthier or offer more nutrients than natural foods or conventionally grown products. At least, not yet. People just feel organic foods are safer because chemicals are not used in their production, explains Keri Gans, an ADA spokeswoman and registered dietician in private practice in NY.

"The bottom line is one isn't healthier than the other," said Gans. "The choice comes down to whether you want food sprayed with pesticides."

Still, she said the FDA discourages manufacturers from using the word natural on their labels because of its ambiguity. Additionally, foods labeled natural unfairly imply that they're superior to other foods when, in reality, they're not.

There are also misperceptions about organic foods. Consider the difference between organic vegetables shipped from Chile and nonorganic vegetables grown locally. Chances are, you're better off with nonorganic foods grown close to home because they're more nutrient-rich, she said. Many factors, such as time, change in temperature or even exposure to air and light can potentially rob veggies of their nutrients.

Labels really have one key purpose: helping marketers convince people that their food is healthier than it really is, said Lona Sandon, a registered dietician at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. As an example, she points to 7-Up soda being marketed as natural. While it contains natural ingredients like lemon, lime and sugar, she said it isn't something she would call a healthy choice.

The same holds true with organic chocolate chip cookies.

"There's really no big difference whether you're eating added sugar out of an organic chocolate chip cookie or whether you're getting that added fat and calories out of Chips Ahoy," she said. "Don't be fooled that organic [or natural] cookies are better than others. They're still cookies."

### **Think "Whole"**

Try to select whole foods or those in their most natural state. Buy apples instead of applesauce that's loaded with sugar. Drink 100 percent juice instead of juice drinks or cocktails. Steer clear of pre-packaged foods where you just add water. Choose fresh meats from the butcher counter instead of those "weird deli, squashed-up things," said Sandon, also an ADA spokesperson.

While organic products are always natural, natural foods aren't always organic, she said. But neither of these labels is synonymous with health, especially considering the wide range of organic or natural products being sold these days.

So the next time you're in the grocery store, don't get hung up on these buzzwords. Instead, focus on what really matters. Go beyond the front label. Turn the jar, can or package around to read the nutritional label on the back. How much fat, sugar and sodium does it contain? How much protein? How many vitamins and minerals?

Then use some common sense. Fresh veggies, fruits, fish, whole grain foods and lean meats or poultry will always rule over everything else, no matter what the label says.

Disclaimer Policy  
Copyright 2009 - Eat Drink and Be