

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Common Misconceptions about Organic Produce

Organic produce, grass-fed beef, free-range chicken...terms that were rarely heard a mere 10 years ago. However, the demand for and intake of these products has quickly escalated (up 8.4% in 2016 alone). In a society that is increasingly focused not only on *what* they eat, but *where* it comes from, this change is not surprising. As a Registered Dietitian, I am always happy to hear that someone is paying attention to what they are putting in their body. However, it seems that there are several misconceptions about what exactly some of these terms mean. Today, I want to focus on organic fruits and vegetables and explain some of their most commonly misunderstood characteristics.

The word “organic” is defined and regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). It is used to indicate that a food product has been produced through approved methods. Specifically for organic produce, this means the crop was grown and harvested without the use of irradiation, sewage sludge, synthetic fertilizers, prohibited pesticides, or genetically modified organisms (GMO’s). Companies pay for the USDA to verify their product is organic and use the official “USDA Organic” label on their package. Now that we’ve established what organic produce *is*, let’s discuss some important things it is *not*.

#1-Organic produce is **NOT** grown without pesticides--it is only grown without synthetic (man-made) pesticides. There is an approved list of naturally-occurring pesticides that organic farms may use on their crops. While natural may seem safer, it’s important to note that both synthetic and naturally-occurring pesticides can be harmful if consumed in large enough quantities.

#2-Organic produce is **NOT** more nutritious than conventionally-grown fruits and veggies. This is an assumption that I hear often, that simply isn’t true. Despite the differences in growing techniques, the end product has a very similar nutrient profile. In fact, a large study was done that reviewed 162 articles ranging from 1958-2008 that compared nutrients in organic vs. conventionally-grown produce. The result? They found no significant differences in 15 key nutrients including vitamin C, beta-carotene, and calcium.

#3-Organic produce does **NOT** taste significantly better. Many people name improved taste as one of their reasons for choosing to purchase organic products. However, blind taste tests have shown that people cannot consistently tell a difference between the two. Freshness, seasonality, and preparation are much more likely to influence produce’s taste than whether it was grown organically.

My goal is not to persuade you to avoid organic produce. In fact, I am happy to see you eating more fruits and vegetables regardless of how they are grown! Instead, my goal is to help you be a more informed consumer so that you can shop with confidence and feel good about where your food dollars go!

For more information about organic produce or the Nutrition Services offered at Fairfield Memorial Hospital visit www.fairfieldmemorial.org/content/nutrition-services or call 618-847-8326.