

How to be a budget organic

What's worth the extra cost, what's not, and how to save in other ways

With all the news about rising food costs, you may be wondering if the organic milk you've been putting in your cart is worth the extra cash. It is. Organic food is more expensive, but when it comes to the staples of your diet, organics are a worthwhile investment, with payoffs that might surprise you. The benefits influence your health today and long term. Here, why certain foods are worth the splurge, plus tips to save you money while keeping your diet nutritionally and ecologically sound.

They Have More Nutrients:

Reports of organic food not being better for you are outdated. A brand new analysis of about 100 studies, including more than 40 published in the past 7 years, found that the average levels of nearly a dozen nutrients are 25% higher in organic produce.

There May Be Weight Benefits:

Research in rats found that those fed an all organic diet (versus conventional food) had lower weights, less body fat, and stronger immune systems. Plus, the "clean diet" animals were calmer and slept better.

You Consume Fewer Toxins:

Eating the 12 most contaminated fruits and vegetables exposes you to about 14 pesticides a day. A study supported by the EPA measured pesticide levels in children's urine before and after a switch to an organic diet. After just 5 days, the chemicals decreased to undetectable levels. The number one barrier that prevents shoppers from taking advantage of these benefits: cost.

These are the top organic picks on which to spend your food dollars.

Produce

The most important fruits and vegetables you should buy organic: (1) those with the greatest pesticide residues and (2) the ones you eat most often.

Government lab tests show that even after washing, certain fruits and vegetables carry much higher levels of pesticides than do others. Between 2000 and 2005, the not for profit Environmental Working Group (EWG) analyzed the results of nearly 51,000 tests for residues on produce. Based on the data, they created a "dirty dozen" list of the most contaminated fruits and veggies. Top offenders include: peaches, apples, bell peppers, celery, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, pears, grapes (imported), spinach, lettuce, and potatoes. Always buying these foods organic is ideal, but if you can't, focus on those you eat all the time.

Shop Smart

Buy organic produce in season (preferably local), when it's most affordable usually at half the cost.

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Choose organic foods without fancy packaging. A bag of 10 2 ounce single serving packets of organic baby carrots is \$5, but for \$3.50 less, you can buy a 1 pound bag of whole organic carrots. This veggie is not on the EWG's high risk list, but if you buy carrots often, go organic.

Milk, Yogurt & Cheese

Per half gallon, organic milk is more expensive about \$4 versus \$2.50 but it's worth the splurge. Recent studies revealed impressive findings on organic milk. Here are some highlights:

It contains 75% more beta carotene, as much as a serving of brussels sprouts.

It has 50% more vitamin E, a powerful antioxidant that aids the immune system and fights cancer and heart disease.

It provides 2 to 3 times the antioxidants lutein and zeaxanthin, and about 70% more omega 3 fatty acids.

Organic milk also contains more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). This good fat has been linked to numerous health benefits, including stronger immunity, less belly fat, a lower risk of type 2 diabetes, and healthier arteries. Like meat, organic dairy contains no hormones or antibiotics, and there are no pesticides in the cows' feed. (In 2005, diphenylamine, a pesticide residue, was found in up to 92% of more than 700 conventional milk samples.) Current guidelines recommend three servings of dairy per day, and among organic choices, milk tends to be the most frugal option at about 50 cents per 1 cup serving (versus 31 cents for conventional).

Organic cheese (about \$1.30 per serving) and yogurt (about 60 cents per serving) are also more costly.

Shop Smart Download coupons:

Many organic dairy companies such as Stonyfield Farm (stonyfield.com) and Organic Valley (organic.valley.coop) offer printable coupons on their sites for as much as \$1 off a half gallon of milk or 16 ounce container of yogurt.

Meat & Poultry

A study in the journal Meat Science compared the nutritional content of organic and nonorganic chicken meat. The researchers found that the organic samples contained 28% more omega 3s, essential fatty acids that are linked to reduced rates of heart disease, depression, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, inflammation, and Alzheimer's disease. Animals raised organically can't be given antibiotics or growth hormones.

Shop Smart Stretch it:

The recommended portion size for meat and poultry is 3 ounces, the size of a deck of cards. Stick to this amount and round out your meal with less expensive whole grains and veggies to dramatically cut meal costs and improve nutritional balance. A pound of organic whole chicken for \$4 can feed a family of four with brown rice and in season veggies on the side.

Shop Smart Become a "flexitarian":

Choose beans as a protein source a few times a week. A 15 ounce can of organic beans is just \$1.20, and a 1 cup serving provides 36% of your daily fiber needs. Bonus: Beans are some of the highest ranking antioxidant foods.

Organics to skip

Step into any health food store and you're likely to find an organic version of just about everything, including cotton candy. While it's true that organic "junk foods" are better for the planet, they generally aren't better for you. A six pack of organic soda costs \$5; yes, it's made without high fructose corn syrup, but each can contains 160 calories (20 more than a 12 ounce can of Coca Cola Classic) and zero nutrients. Cutting back on sweets and nutritionally void extras altogether is the best way to get the most nutrition bang for your buck.

More ways to save

1. Go generic Nearly every mainstream supermarket now carries organic store brand options, including Safeway's O Organics line, H E B's Central Market Organic selections, Wal Mart's Great Value private label, Stop & Shop's Nature's Promise, and Supervalu's Wild Harvest. Organics are also available within Kroger, Publix, and Wegmans store brands.
2. Join a price club Organic options can be found at Costco, BJ's, and Sam's Club.
3. Buy in bulk You can purchase many organic grains (including brown and wild rice and whole oats), pastas, flours, dried fruits, and nuts in the bulk sections of stores for far less. Organic brown rice in bulk is about 99 cents per pound.