

Health Tips

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with

Dr. D



 Printer Friendly

Health Tip: Organic Foods - Healthy or Hype?

After slogging up an interminable hill on a recent backcountry ski trip, my friend and I stopped to rest and to take in the view. He offered some of his nut mixture as a snack and then mentioned, "It's organic." Later, as we were eating his smorgasbord of appetizers, he again pointed out that "They're all organic." Although I had some vague notion of what organic foods are, following our ski outing, I researched what is required for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to label a food product as "organic." In a nutshell, "organic food is produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations." For meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products to be labeled as being organic, they must come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation, likewise have no role in the production or processing of organic foods.

How do foods receive the government's "organic" label? First of all, a USDA-approved inspector makes sure the farmer or rancher is

following all the rules necessary to meet government organic food standards. The companies that process organic foods prior to going on the supermarket shelves or restaurants must also be certified. Be aware also that the terms "Natural and "Organic" are not interchangeable. Only food labeled "organic" has been certified as meeting USDA organic standards.



If a product is found to be at least 95 percent organic, it is eligible to receive the USDA Organic seal. This can be found on vegetables, fruit, packages of meat, cartons of milk or eggs, cheese, and other single-ingredient foods. For foods with more than one ingredient, a slightly different labeling process is used. For example, multi-ingredient cereal may be identified as either being "100% Organic", or "Organic", if it contains 95-100% organic ingredients, or may specify

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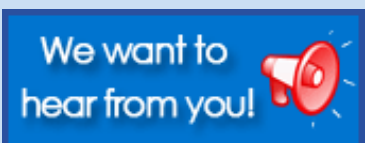
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which ingredient is organic on the package front if the cereal is made with at least 70% organic products. Products with less than 70 percent organic ingredients may list specific organically produced ingredients on the side panel of the package, but may not make any organic claims on the front of the package.

Does this mean that organic foods are safer or more nutritious than



conventionally produced foods? Not necessarily, according to the USDA, but common sense would indicate that choosing organic foods offers a number of health and environmental benefits. Perhaps the biggest downside of organic foods is the "sticker shock" when going through the check out line. Government regulation of what is and what isn't organic was never considered by organic foods pioneers such as Sir Albert Howard and J.I. Rodale, but it has gone a long way to insure that consumers are

getting what they expect when they see the "USDA Organic" label. For more detailed information on organic standards, visit the USDA web site at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>

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