




# Start the year right

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# When it pays to buy organic

**Which apple? The decision doesn't end once you've figured out whether to buy, say, the McIntosh or the Red Delicious. In many food stores across the country, you're also faced with the more vexing question of buying organic or conventional, and not just at the apple bin. All kinds of organic fruits, vegetables, meats, poultry, eggs, cooking oils, even cosmetics are crowding store shelves.**

For many shoppers, the decision often comes down to money. On average, you'll pay 50 percent extra for organic food, but you can easily end up shelling out 100 percent more, especially for milk and meat. Nevertheless, organic products are one of the fastest-growing categories in the food business. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. consumers bought organic foods and beverages in 2005, up from about half in 2004. While some buy organic to support its producers' environmentally friendly practices, most are trying to cut their exposure to chemicals in the foods they eat.

Critics argue that we're wasting our money because there's no proof that conventionally produced foods pose significant health risks. Now, however, there are many new reasons to buy organic. First, a growing body of research shows that

pesticides and other contaminants are more prevalent in the foods we eat, in our bodies, and in the environment than we thought. And studies show that by eating organic foods, you can reduce your exposure to the potential health risks associated with those chemicals.

Second, we found many ways to add more organic products to your shopping list without busting your budget. For one

## CR Quick Take

**Nearly two-thirds of consumers bought organic products in the past year, despite higher prices.**

- **The good news:** New studies show that by eating organic food, you can greatly reduce your exposure to chemicals found in conventionally produced food.
- **More good news:** You don't have to clean out your wallet to buy organic foods if you know which ones to buy and where.
- **The bad news:** As more big players enter the organic market, government standards have come under attack. So it's more important than ever to understand food labeling and what's behind it.

thing, you don't have to buy organic across the board. The truth is, not all organic-labeled products offer added health value. We found, for example, that it's worth paying more for organic apples, peaches, spinach, milk, and beef to avoid chemicals found in the conventionally produced versions of those items. But you can skip organic asparagus and broccoli because conventional varieties generally have undetectable pesticide levels. You can also pass on organic seafood and shampoo, which have labels that are often misleading. (See ShopSmart, on page 14.)

Moreover, we found that you need not pay a premium for organic foods if you know where to shop. See our tips (page 17) for ways to cut your organic-food tab.

But you should also be aware that as more consumers are turning to organic products, some of the country's largest food producers are trying to chip away at what organic labels promise to deliver.

## ORGANIC FOOD FIGHT

If the organic label conjures up images of cackling chickens running free in a field and pristine vegetables without a trace of pesticides, keep reading. While the organic label indicates that a product

# ht

Here we tell you how to do it, with the right food, diet, exercise equipment, and financial planning—essentials that can help guarantee your physical and emotional well-being. Throughout this issue you will find reports that can serve as a road map to improving your health and enhancing your wealth. We wrapped it all up with 10 quick tips for a healthful 2006 and 10 simple fixes for your finances, our best advice on the small changes that you can make to help ensure a more prosperous life.

## Weight-loss surgery

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meets certain government standards, those standards are coming under pressure as big companies cash in on the growing demand for organic foods. H. Lee Scott Jr., chief executive of Wal-Mart Stores, has described organic as "one of the fastest-growing categories in all of food and in Wal-Mart."

During the past decade, U.S. organic sales have grown 20 percent or more annually. Organic food and beverage sales are estimated to have topped \$15 billion in 2004, up from \$3.5 billion in 1997. Sales are projected to more than double by 2009.

"Consumer spending on organic has grown so much that we've attracted big

players who want to bend the rules so that they can brand their products as organic without incurring the expenses involved in truly living up to organic standards," says Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, an advocacy group based in Finland, Minn.

Lobbying by large food companies to weaken organic rules started when the U.S. Department of Agriculture fully implemented organic labeling standards in October 2002. Food producers immediately fought the new rules. A Georgia chicken producer was ultimately able to persuade one of his state's congressional representatives to slip through a federal

legislative amendment in a 2003 appropriations bill to cut its costs. The amendment stated that if the price of organic feed was more than twice the cost of regular feed—which can contain heavy metals, pesticides, and animal by-products—then livestock producers could feed their animals less costly, nonorganic feed but still label their products organic.

That bizarre change in standards was repealed in April 2003 after consumers and organic producers protested, but the fight to maintain the integrity of organic labeling continues. In October 2005, Congress weakened the organic-labeling law despite protests from more than 325,000

## didyouknow?

### FOOD LABELS CAN BE MISLEADING

Organic-sounding labels can be confusing, or even meaningless. Below are examples of labels that are meaningful because there are government standards to back them up. You'll also find a couple of examples of meaningless labels. For more information on food labels, go to [www.eco-labels.org](http://www.eco-labels.org).

#### MEANINGFUL

**"100% Organic."** No synthetic ingredients are allowed by law. Also, production processes must meet federal organic standards and must have been independently verified by accredited inspectors.

**"Organic."** At least 95 per-

cent of ingredients are organically produced. The remainder can be nonorganic or synthetic ingredients. One exception: Organic labels on seafood are meaningless because the U.S. Department of Agriculture has no standards to back them up.

**"Made with Organic Ingredients."** At least 70 percent of ingredients are organic. The remaining 30 percent must come from the USDA's approved list.

#### MEANINGLESS

**"Free-range" or "free-roaming."** Stamped on eggs, chicken, and other meat, this label suggests that an animal has spent a good portion of its life



**NO KIDDING** "Organic" can mean that 5 percent of the ingredients aren't.

outdoors. But U.S. government standards are weak. The rule for the label's use on poultry products, for example, is merely that outdoor access be made available for "an undetermined period each day." In other

words, if a coop door was open for just 5 minutes a day, regardless of whether the chickens went outside, the animals' meat and eggs could legally be labeled "free-range."

#### "Natural" or "All Natural."

This label does not mean organic. The reason is that no standard definition for this term exists except when it's applied to meat and poultry products, which the USDA defines as not containing any artificial flavoring, colors, chemical preservatives, or synthetic ingredients. And the claim is not verified. The producer or manufacturer alone decides whether to use it.

consumers and 250 organic-food companies. The law overturns a recent court ruling that barred the use of synthetic ingredients in "organic" foods. It mostly affects processed products such as canned soups and frozen pizza.

The Massachusetts-based Organic Trade Association (OTA), which represents large and small food producers including corporate giants such as Kraft Foods and Archer Daniels Midland Co., supported the amendment. "The issue is whether processed products could use a list of benign synthetic ingredients already approved by the National Organic Standards Board," says Katherine DiMatteo, executive director of the OTA, "and we do not believe standards will be weakened at all."

Not all organic producers agree, how-

ever. Executives at Earthbound Farm, which has been in the organic business for more than 20 years and is the nation's leading supplier of specialty organic salad greens, were startled to find their company's name on an OTA letter supporting the amendment. Earthbound objects to built-in "emergency exemptions" that would allow nonorganic ingredients in organically labeled food if the organic alternative is considered "commercially unavailable." As with the Georgia chicken-feed case, if organic corn is expensive because it's in short supply, a soup maker might argue that it is commercially unavailable and get an exemption to use nonorganic corn.

"This presents a risk to the integrity of the organic label that we would have preferred not to see," says Charles Sweat,

chief operating officer at Earthbound Farm. (For more on the issue, see Viewpoint, on page 57.)

Other changes in the organic industry are occurring more quietly in the farm fields. Wal-Mart alone gobbles up so much of the organic dairy supply that some producers that have historically accounted for the bulk of organic products on the market haven't been able to meet the new demand. Suppliers filling the gap are doing so in part by exploiting loopholes in the organic rules, some consumer advocates say.

Organic Valley, a Wisconsin-based national cooperative of farmers that had been one of Wal-Mart's primary suppliers of organic milk, ended that direct relationship at the end of 2004. "When the first U.S. case of mad cow was discovered

## shopsmart

Know when it pays to buy organic food products to reduce your exposure to pesticides and other additives, when it might sometimes pay, and when it's a waste of your money. Use this section the next time you're making a grocery list. (For tips on getting organic food for less, see page 17.)

### Buy these items organic as often as possible

**WHAT** Apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, red raspberries, spinach, and strawberries.

**WHY** The U.S. Department of Agriculture's own lab testing reveals that even after washing, some fruits and vegetables consistently carry much higher levels of pesticide residue than others. Based on an analysis of more than 100,000 U.S. government pesticide test results, researchers at the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a research and advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., have developed the "dirty dozen" fruits and vegetables, above, that they say you should always buy organic if possible because their conventionally grown counterparts tend to be laden with pesticides. Among fruits, nectarines had the highest percentage testing positive for pesticide residue. Peaches and red raspberries had the most pesticides (nine) on a single sample. Among vegetables, celery and spinach most often carried pesticides, with spinach having the highest number (10) on a single sample. (For more information on pesticide levels for other types of produce, go to [www.foodnews.org](http://www.foodnews.org).)

**WHAT YOU'LL PAY** About 50 percent more on average for organic produce, but prices vary based on the item and the time of year. A CONSUMER REPORTS price survey conducted in the New York City area in October 2005 found a premium of 24 percent on organic strawberries and 33 percent on grapes and spinach. Organic Idaho potatoes cost 101 percent more than conven-

tional. When you buy organic produce in season at a farmer's market or directly from local providers, however, you might avoid paying a premium at all.

**WHAT** Meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy.

**WHY** You greatly reduce the risk of exposure to the agent believed to cause mad cow disease and minimize exposure to other potential toxins in nonorganic feed. You also avoid the results of production methods that use daily supplemental hormones and antibiotics, which have been linked to increased antibacterial resistance in humans.

**WHAT YOU'LL PAY** Often double the price of nonorganic, though you might save money by buying direct from local farms. For instance, in December 2005 the Organic Trade Association reported that in Iowa, organic ground beef was available for \$4.25 a pound and beef tenderloin for \$16 a pound.

**WHAT** Baby food.

**WHY** Children's developing bodies are especially vulnerable to toxins and they may be at risk of higher exposure. Baby food is often made up of condensed fruits or vegetables, potentially concentrating pesticide residues. Michelle Faist, a spokeswoman for Del Monte, says that even though its baby foods are not organic, pesticides and heavy metals are kept below government-recommended levels.

**WHAT YOU'LL PAY** Varies widely by store.



in a dairy cow at the end of 2003," says Theresa Marquez, chief marketing executive at Organic Valley, "demand for organic milk spiked and we've been in a short-supply situation ever since, with demand growing at 25 percent annually and supply growing at only 10 percent."

With supplies limited, Marquez says, the company decided to "stay true to our mission" and give top priority to filling orders from natural-food markets, its oldest customers, leaving it to Horizon Organic and other large competitors to "duke it out figuring out how to service Wal-Mart."

Horizon Organic is an organic dairy company that was acquired in 2003 by Dean Foods, the leading U.S. dairy processor. Its operations range in size from a 12-cow farm in Vermont to a

4,000-cow operation in Idaho, where animals may be confined in outdoor corrals and given organic feed, grasses, and hay. They graze in open pastures only on a rotating basis instead of primarily grazing in open pastures, as cows are required to do on farms that supply Organic Valley.

Current federal regulations state that organically raised animals must have access to pasture and may be "temporarily confined only for reasons of health, safety, the animal's stage of production, or to protect soil or water quality." But that vague language allows large producers to cut corners and compromise on what consumers expect from organic food, consumer advocates say.

The regulations also leave open questions about whether dairy animals could have been treated with antibiotics or con-

sumed feed containing genetically modified grain or animal by-products prior to becoming part of an organic dairy farm.

Horizon says it uses no antibiotics or growth hormones in its organic herd, though it can't control what animals eat before they arrive there. And the company says it plans to upgrade its Idaho farm to offer more pasture by 2007. In the meantime, Horizon says, its cows are being kept in good health and treated humanely. "We permit cows to exercise and exhibit natural behaviors," says Kelly Shea, director of government and industry relations at Horizon. "We would never support lowering the standards."

#### WHAT'S IN THE FOOD

So what can you count on when you buy organic? No animals, except dairy

## Buy these items organic if price is no object

**WHAT** Asparagus, avocados, bananas, broccoli, cauliflower, sweet corn, kiwi, mangos, onions, papaya, pineapples, and sweet peas.

**WHY** Multiple pesticide residues are, in general, rarely found on conventionally grown versions of these fruits and vegetables, according to research by the EWG. So if you're buying organic only for health reasons, you may not want to pay 22 percent extra for organic bananas, let alone more than 150 percent for organic asparagus—the premiums we found in our price survey of several New York City area supermarkets.

**WHAT** Breads, oils, potato chips, pasta, cereals, and other packaged foods, such as canned or dried fruit and vegetables.

**WHY** Although these processed products may have lower levels of contaminants in them, they offer limited health value because processing tends to wash away important nutrients. The process of milling organic whole grains into flour, for example, eliminates fiber and vitamins, though they are sometimes added back in. The more a food is processed, the less health value its organic version offers, especially in products such as cereals and pastas with labels that say "made with organic ingredients." Read the list of ingredients and you might find that while the flour is organic, the eggs aren't. The processed foods with the most added value are labeled "100% Organic" and "USDA organic." Price premiums vary. In our survey, organic Heinz ketchup cost 25 percent more than the conventional product; organic minestrone soup was only 8 percent more.



## Don't bother buying these items organic

**WHAT** Seafood.

**WHY** Whether caught in the wild or farmed, fish can be labeled organic, despite the presence of contaminants such as mercury and PCBs. Some wild fish such as bluefish are very high in PCBs, and tuna and swordfish are laced with mercury. The USDA has not yet developed organic certification standards for seafood. In the meantime, producers are allowed to make their own organic claims as long as they don't use "USDA" or "certified organic" logos. California, however, recently passed a law that prohibits the use of any organic labeling on fish and other seafood until either state or federal certification standards are established.

**WHAT** Cosmetics.

**WHY** Unless a personal-care product consists primarily of organic agricultural ingredients, such as aloe vera gel, it's pointless to buy organic in this category. Most cosmetics contain a mix of ingredients, and USDA regulations allow shampoos and body lotions to carry an organic label if their main ingredient is

"organic hydrosol," which is simply water in which something organic, such as a lavender leaf, has been soaked. While the USDA claims that organic labeled-cosmetics follow the same standards as food, we have found indiscriminate use of synthetic ingredients and violations of food-labeling standards.



"Many of the ingredients in personal-care products didn't grow out of the ground but in test tubes—they're chemicals," says Lauren Sucher, director of public affairs at the EWG. Just because a product has the word "organic" or "natural" in its name doesn't necessarily mean it's safer. Only 11 percent of ingredients found in personal-care products, organic or not,

have ever been screened for safety. In fact, when the EWG conducted its own safety rating of these products (available at [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org)), scoring them on a scale of 0, for those posing lowest level of concern, to 5, for the highest concern due to potentially unsafe ingredients, those with scores of 4 or more included benign-sounding Naturessence All Day Moisture Cream.

cows prior to being moved to organic farms, can be given antibiotics, growth hormones, or feed made from animal by-products, which can transmit mad cow disease. No genetic modification or irradiation is permitted, nor is fertilizer made with sewage sludge or synthetic ingredients, all of which are allowed in most conventional food production.

Organically raised animals must also have access to the outdoors, though it might simply mean that cattle are cooped up in outdoor pens. The rules governing poultry are even less stringent than for other livestock. Some "organic" chickens, for example, spend their short lives confined in coops with screen windows.

Organic fruits and vegetables are farmed with botanical or primarily non-synthetic pest controls quickly broken

down by sunlight and oxygen, instead of long-lasting synthetic chemicals. Organic produce sometimes carries chemical residues because of pesticides that are now pervasive in groundwater and rain, but their chemical load is much lower.

According to the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a research and advocacy organization in Washington, D.C., eating the 12 most contaminated fruits and vegetables exposes you to about 20 pesticides a day on average. If you eat the 12 least contaminated, you're exposed to about two pesticides a day. (For more on the health issues associated with pesticides, see Health Wise, below.)

Joseph Rosen, a professor of food science at Rutgers University, says that when it comes to pesticide exposure, "the

amount in conventional foods is so low that it's not a health threat." Richard Wiles, senior vice president at the EWG, on the other hand, says that the cumulative effect of even low-level multiple pesticide exposures is both worrisome and little studied at this point.

#### BUYING ORGANIC ON THE CHEAP

If you decide that you'd prefer fewer chemicals and other additives in your food, the choice isn't an easy one. Organic sticker shock can hit the most stalwart of organic shoppers. The fact is that organic farmers produce more labor-intensive products and don't enjoy the economies of scale or government subsidies that their big brothers in agribusiness do. But we found many ways to save on the cost of organic products.

## healthwise

### CHEMICAL HEALTH RISKS OF CONVENTIONALLY PRODUCED FOODS

Here's what we know about those pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, and other chemicals used in the production of conventional meats, vegetables, and other foods:

**Pesticides.** More than a dozen formerly widely used pesticides have been banned, restricted, or voluntarily withdrawn by manufacturers since 1996, when a new federal law required pesticides to meet safety standards for children, whose developing immune, central-nervous, and hormonal systems are especially vulnerable to damage from toxic chemicals. Under that law, more pesticides are being investigated each year and banned or are undergoing lowering of limits on what can safely be tolerated, but consumers can still easily consume small amounts of more than 30 pesticides daily when eating a healthful variety of foods.

New evidence also shows that contrary to previous scientific belief, pesticides in a woman's bloodstream can be passed to a fetus in the womb. A study released in 2005 in which umbilical-cord blood of 10 children was collected by the Red Cross and tested for pollutants showed that 21 pesticides crossed the placenta.

Eating an organic diet can limit further exposure, however. A study supported by the Environmental Protection Agency and



**GOOD EATS?** Con conventionally fed cows receive a steady diet of hormones and antibiotics before slaughter.

published in 2005 measured pesticide levels in the urine of 23 children in Washington State before and after a switch to an organic diet. Researchers found that after just five consecutive days on the new diet, specific markers for commonly used pesticides decreased to undetectable levels, and remained that way until conventional diets were reintroduced. The study's conclusion: "An organic diet provides a dramatic and immediate protective effect" against such pesticide exposure.

"A lot of these pesticides are toxic to the brain," says Philip Landrigan, M.D., a professor of pediatrics and preventative medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. "We have very good evidence that exposure of the fetus to organophos-

phorus pesticides produces babies with small head circumference, which is a risk factor for reduced intelligence and behavioral disturbances."

**Hormones.** Studies suggest that synthetic growth hormones may be carcinogenic and that exposure to them may be linked to the precocious onset of puberty in girls. The USDA bans the use of such hormones in all poultry (organic or not), but when it comes to hogs, beef, or dairy cattle, only organic producers are legally bound not to use them.

**Antibiotics.** Farmers' widespread use of antibiotics to speed up animals' growth and to deal with health issues that crop up from keeping animals in overcrowded and unsanitary pens has helped spawn antibiotic-resistant bacteria. This resistance increases the odds that a drug that might have saved your life if you were to be hit by, say, a life-threatening case of food poisoning will now do you no good.

**Other toxins.** Nonorganic foods can expose you to a range of other contaminants with potential health risks. Conventionally raised chicken, for example, eat feed that can contain neurotoxins, such as arsenic or heavy metals. And the animals' feet may be dipped in motor oil as a treatment for an ailment known as scaly leg mite.

**Comparison shop.** Do a price check among local grocery stores for often purchased organic items and shop where you find the lowest prices. In the New York City area, for example, we found a 4-ounce jar of Earth's Best organic baby food for as little as 69 cents and as much as \$1.29. When it comes to fresh produce, remember that you'll save by buying it in season.

**Go local.** You can find organic growers at most farmer's markets, and a USDA study in 2002 found that about 40 percent of those farmers don't charge a premium. For listings of local farmer's markets and other sources, go to [www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets](http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets) and [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org).

**Join the farm team.** Buy a share in a community-supported organic farm and you'll get a weekly supply of produce from spring until fall. The cost to feed a family of four generally ranges from \$300 to \$500 for the season. (Some farms also require you to work a few hours a month distributing or picking produce.) The savings can be substantial. A price study by a community-supported farm in the Northeast showed that the average \$10 weekly cost for a shareholder's produce supply almost always beat farmer's market organic prices and often cost less than the same nonorganic items at a supermarket. Go to [www.sare.org](http://www.sare.org) for a list of community-supported farms.

**Order by mail.** National providers will ship items such as organic beef ([www.mynaturalbeef.com](http://www.mynaturalbeef.com)). Some local businesses, such as FreshDirect ([www.freshdirect.com](http://www.freshdirect.com)) in the New York City area and Pioneer Organics ([www.pioneerorganics.com](http://www.pioneerorganics.com)) in the Pacific Northwest, offer home deliveries. Other helpful sites are at [www.eatwellguide.org](http://www.eatwellguide.org) and [www.theorganicpages.com](http://www.theorganicpages.com).

**Be a supermarket spy.** Make sure you get what you pay for by watching where produce sits on shelves. All grocers are legally required to stack organic fruits and vegetables where they won't be exposed to water runoff from the misting of conventional produce, which could contaminate organic items with pesticide residue. If a store is not following that rule, you may be wasting your money by buying organic produce there.

## Fighting for a strong 'organic' label

Competition is fierce for a sliver of the lucrative organic-foods pie. Witness the stream of efforts, including a recent change in the law, to weaken the "organic" label's meaning, mainly on processed food.

After years of wrangling, the label has become one of the most potent in the food industry. Consumer groups, including Consumers Union, publisher of CONSUMER REPORTS, believe that the label should live up to the confidence placed in it by an increasing number of Americans.

In 1990, the Organic Foods Production Act was passed by Congress as the base for an independent, public program. After years of debate, and a record 275,000 comments from the public, the National Organic Program was launched in 2002.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture oversees the act, guided by the National Organic Standards Board, a nongovernmental group that includes consumer advocates, farmers, and food processors. The board also has authority for approving all allowable nonorganic ingredients. Five percent of the ingredients in food labeled organic and 30 percent in "made with organic ingredients" may be nonorganic.

Since 2002, there have been repeated assaults on the board's authority and on the standards themselves from companies that want to reap the benefits of the organic label without the burden of higher production costs (see report on page 12). CU has been critical of both the Department of Agriculture and Congress for bowing to industry pressures and has worked to thwart many of those assaults.

Recently an amendment was slipped into the agriculture appropriations bill at the last minute and without opportunity for public input. The original law had barred the use of synthetic ingredients in the nonorganic portion allowed in food with the organic label. A 2005 court ruling upheld that standard, but the amendment to the appropriations bill overrode the court. That move to sidestep the court's decision was engineered by the Organic Trade Association and supported by some of its members, including General Mills, Horizon, Kraft, and Smucker's.

CU believes that action must be taken to preserve the organic label's integrity:

- Congress should undo the damage done to organic-label standards by the change made in the appropriations bill. A nationwide online survey of more than 1,200 U.S. adults conducted in March 2005 by CONSUMER REPORTS showed that most consumers do not expect to find artificial ingredients in food that is labeled organic.
- Changes in the organic program should follow a public process, and they should represent the interests of all stakeholders. Many revisions to the organic program go unannounced. Consumers Union has been monitoring those changes, educating consumers, and urging national and state governments to protect the integrity of the organic label. But the USDA should be responsible for publishing any final changes—and the intended effects—on its National Organic Program Web site.
- The USDA should allow the organic label only on products with clear, consistent, enforceable standards behind that claim. Fish, for example, can now be labeled organic even when it harbors contaminants such as mercury and PCBs.

Products that truly meet consumer expectations for organic can use additional, approved labels to stand out from products that don't and to transcend the recent weakening of the standards.

Companies that make organic food with no synthetic ingredients can promote that practice with a claim of "no synthetic substances were used in production." Organic coffee, tea, and chocolate that also carry the certified "fair trade" label ensure that farmers get a fair price for their product. Organic meat and dairy products with a "certified humane" or "free farmed" label meet high animal-welfare standards. And look for the USDA's Process Verified Program seal alongside labels such as "100% grass fed for entire lifetime" or "never fed antibiotics or animal byproducts."