

# Public perceptions of organic food



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Organic food, often marketed as a healthier and more natural alternative to conventional food, is a source of great controversy as many people do not fully understand what the differences are between an organic product and a conventional product. The public's perception and views of organic food are an immense factor in the overall adoption of organic foods. Unfortunately, the public, as a whole, does not fully understand all of the information about organic foods. As a result of this lack of public knowledge, there is a significant amount of controversy about surrounding the topic. Nearly every argument about organic food is related to one of three topics. The most controversial topic being, of course, the higher initial price of organic food when compared to traditionally produced foods. In the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, Jessica Aschemann-Witzel said that the demand for organic food is hampered because of the high cost. (Aschemann-Witzel) Another fairly common controversial topic is the possibility of health benefits of organic foods, or rather, if there are any significant health benefits at all. And lastly, the least commonly discussed topic is the sustainability of the farming methods used to grow organic foods. Various types of farming systems may have effects on the sustainability of the food grown. These systems may also impact the ecosystem through human and animal health, and the sustainability of the environment. (Mie) These issues all stem from the blatant lack of public knowledge on the subject of organic foods as a whole. Due to this lack of information, many people believe false information about organic foods

By far, the most controversial topic regarding organic food is the higher price that comes with the label. As a result of this controversy, many people

believe untrue things about the cost of organic food. Organic food does tend to parade a marginally higher cost to the end consumer when compared to conventional food. This is shown in a paper published by the USDA that showed the difference between organic and conventional food throughout a wide range of foods. This paper focuses Atlanta Georgia in 2012. It shows that wholesale quantities, 50lbs each, of organic russet potatoes were, on average, \$37. 23 more expensive than conventional russet potatoes.

(Greene) In conjunction with the price difference noted by Greene, Ashemann-Witzel states that many people believe that organic food is a luxury which is only attainable by the wealthy. As a result of this misconception, a large number of lower-class to middle-class people shy away from purchasing the organic version of many products. (Ashemann-Witzel) Both of these facts come together to push the average citizen away from buying organic food as it is out of their budget and many do not see the higher cost to be worth the possible benefits that organic may bring.

While organic food is more expensive than conventional food, it is not simply marked up to cash in on wealthy consumers. The primary cause of increased cost of organic food when compared to conventional food is caused by different farming ways. Organic farmers must adhere to strict government enforced guidelines in order to have their product labeled as organic. These guidelines rule out the use of many cheaper farming methods including certain chemical fertilizers and the use of antibiotics in animals to prevent disease. As a result, the yield of organic crops is lower than conventional crops. In addition, organic farming methods simply cost more than conventional methods.

Organic food products do provide a few health benefits over conventional food. By far, the largest of these advantages is the lack of non-therapeutic antibiotics in organic meat. There is evidence to prove that the overuse of these antibiotics can produce antibiotic-resistant bacteria. (Forman, Silverstein and Bhatia) These drug-resistant bacteria, often called superbugs, can be incredibly dangerous as traditional antibiotics such as amoxicillin do not kill them. Because organic farming methods do not prohibit the use of these antibiotics, organic meat has a significantly smaller risk of having antibiotics in it. To compound this, the organic meat also has a much slimmer chance of producing an antibiotic-resistant bacteria. As well as this organic meat may also be safer due to lower levels of artificial hormones. These artificial hormones are more likely to bind in the human body than natural alternatives. (Forman, Silverstein and Bhatia) This can provide serious issue as hormones control a significant amount of the process that go in within every everyone. If these artificial hormones are in food that is eaten by a child, they may become active in that child and could cause problems. Some of the chemicals can damage DNA, which can lead to cancer. (Galbraith)

Most people who eat organic food believe that there are significant health benefits to doing so. While it does provide some benefits, not everything that people believe is true. One such example is that many people believe that conventional farming methods are far too intense and yield a lower nutritional quality food than organic farming methods. (Williams) While conventional farming methods do utilize more chemicals and is more industrialized, organic foods do not have very many health benefits. Another

common misconception about organic food is actually about conventional food. This is that conventional food is full of dangerous pesticides. This is untrue as the majority of food in the European Union and the European Economic Area contain no pesticides, or, if any pesticides are in the food, the amounts are negligible and pose no threat to human health. (Severine Koch)

In the US, organic food is required to contain 95% organic material and is allowed to contain up to 5% inorganic material as long as it is on the USDA's list. (Forman, Silverstein and Bhatia)

Organic farming is more similar to conventional farming methods that many organic food buyers think. In the United States, the United States Department of Agriculture has strict guidelines that all farmers, organic and conventional, are required to follow. As a result of these guidelines being in place, food in the United States is not allowed to contain dangerous amounts of anything potentially harmful. Even though both organic and conventional farmers have to follow strict guidelines, organic farmers have an extra list that they must comply with. According to the USDA's guidelines, organic food can not use "toxic/synthetic fertilizers, GMO's, Antibiotics, synthetic growth hormones, artificial preservatives/flavors/colors". (Agricultural Marketing Services)

Organic food can be a substantially more sustainable than conventional food. This is due in part to the regulations required by the US Department of Agriculture to label food as organic. These regulations Organic farming methods do not use the same synthetic pesticides as conventional farming methods. (Agricultural Marketing Services) To further elaborate, these pesticides are not present when farming organically this makes organic

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farming methods safer as they do not leach these chemicals into the environment. (Forman, Silverstein and Bhatia) This is a significant advantage organic farming has when compared to conventional farming methods because these chemicals can get into the groundwater and eventually affect the whole environment.

To conclude, organic food is an extremely controversial topic due to the lack of public knowledge on the subject. The higher cost for organic goods brings about much disdain. Resulting in a population that believes that organic food is only for the wealthy. As well as this, the presumed health benefits are not all the general public may believe they are. Many of the proposed benefits of organic food are marginal at best. This is all topped off by the sustainability of organic food when compared with conventional food. As it does not use many of the potentially harmful chemicals in the growing process, organic food production leads more to a healthier environment. All in, while organic food has its benefits and its downfalls, it provides to be a superior alternative to conventionally produced food as its overall effect on both human life and the greater environment are much less dangerous and provide few negative points.

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