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## Organic food

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### Summary

- Organic farming is the production of food without the use of synthetic chemicals or genetically modified components.
  - Organic foods are not necessarily completely chemical free, but the pesticide residues will be considerably lower than those found in produce manufactured with synthetic chemicals.
  - Choose foods labelled 'certified organic' by one of the seven DAFF-accredited certifying organisations.
  - Organic farming is better for the environment and more sustainable.
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Organic farmers and food producers grow and produce food without using synthetic chemicals such as pesticides and artificial fertilisers. They do not use genetically modified (GM) components or expose food to irradiation.

Animal welfare and environmental sustainability are important issues for organic farmers. The term 'organic' can also cover animal products. For example, eggs certified as organic are free range, rather than from caged (battery) hens.

Types of organic produce available in Australia include fruit and vegetables, dried legumes, grains, meat and meat products, dairy foods, eggs, honey and some processed foods.

### Organic farming

Animals raised using organic methods are treated humanely and with respect. For example, chickens are free range and not kept in cages, and cows are not kept in feed lots. Animals are also not fed any growth-regulating drugs, steroids, hormones or antibiotics. However, the animals may be treated with vaccines to prevent disease.

Organic farming is also concerned with protecting the environment and working in harmony with existing ecosystems, including conserving water, soil and energy, and using renewable resources and natural farming cycles. Traditional farming methods are often used, such as rotating crops to prevent depleting the soil of nutrients.

### Pesticides and other chemicals in organic food

Organic foods are not necessarily completely chemical free. They may be grown on land not previously used for organic food production and, therefore, might contain chemical residues. However, the pesticide residues in organic food are considerably lower than those found in foods produced with synthetic chemicals.

Certain naturally occurring pesticides, including pyrethrins, light oils, copper and sulphur, and biological substances such as *Bacillus thuringiensis*, are permitted for use in organic farming.

### Organic food is a growing industry

The Australian organic food industry is booming. It is currently worth around \$200–\$250 million per year domestically and a further \$50–\$80 million per year in exports, with an expected annual growth of up to 60 per cent. In 2010, the retail value of the organic market was estimated to be at least \$1 billion.

Consumer demand for organic food is growing at a rate of 20–30 per cent per year, with retail sales increasing 670 per cent between 1990 and 2001–02. It is estimated that more than six out of every ten Australian households now buy organic foods on occasion.

### Reasons to buy organic food

Most people buy organically-grown food products because they are concerned about pesticides, additives, antibiotics or other chemical residues. Although pesticide residues in fruit and vegetables are monitored in Australia, many people believe organic food is healthier.

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## **Organic food and nutrition content**

Several studies have compared the nutritional content of organic and conventionally grown plants, and most have shown no significant differences in key vitamin and mineral content. However, although the differences are small, research has shown that some organic food has:

- Lower nitrate levels
- Higher vitamin C levels
- Higher levels of selenium.

## **Organic food and ethics**

Organic foods promote more humane treatment of animals, as well as providing meat that is free from hormones and antibiotics. Also, some people worry about the long-term health, economic and environmental consequences of GM foods and choose organic foods in support of an industry that does not use GM techniques.

## **Organic food is better for the environment**

Organic foods promote healthier and more sustainable use of natural resources. Modern farming methods, including excessive use of chemicals, have led to a decline in soil fertility, and an increase in salinity and blue-green algae in waterways over many years. Organic farmers try to minimise damage to the environment by using physical weed control, and animal and green manure.

## **Organic food outlets**

You can buy organic food from:

- Some supermarkets
- Some green grocers
- Health food shops
- Some fresh food markets
- The internet
- Certified organic retailers.

Organic food is often more expensive than conventionally-produced food. This is because organic farming generally operates on a smaller scale, production is more labour intensive and, without herbicides, pesticides and other chemicals, yields are generally smaller.

## **Organic food certification**

Organic farms are only certified after they have been operating according to organic principles for three years. However, the use of the word 'organic' is not regulated in Australia, so it is important to make sure that products you buy come from certified growers and producers.

Before 2009, a standard (guidelines and rules) did not exist for domestic and imported organic foods. This led to a misrepresentation of the word 'organic' in the Australian domestic food market.

Two key standards now govern the production, processing and labelling of organic food in Australia. These are:

- The National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce (for exported foods)
- The Australian Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Products (for domestic and imported foods).

These standards provide an agreed set of procedures to be followed in organic food production. This helps to ensure the integrity and traceability of an organic food product from 'paddock to plate'. The standards include requirements for production, preparation, transportation, marketing and labelling of organic products in Australia.

While it is mandatory for exported organic produce to be certified and meet the National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce, the Australian standard (for domestic and imported foods) is not mandated, and certification is voluntary. Its purpose is to assist the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC – the national consumer regulatory authority) to ensure that claims made about organic and biodynamic products are not false or misleading.

'Organic-certified produce' means the food was grown, harvested, stored and transported without the use of synthetic chemicals, irradiation or fumigants.

### **How to identify food certified as organic**

Suggestions for making sure the food you are buying is organically grown include:

- If you are buying from an organic retailer, check for the Organic Retailers' and Growers' Association of Australia (ORGAA) notice, which should be prominently displayed
- Choose foods with the label 'certified organic' from one of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) accredited certifying organisations
- Check packaging for the grower's name and certification number
- Do not be fooled by packaging that claims the produce is 'natural' or 'chemical free' if the proper certification labelling is not displayed.

### **Accredited certifying organisations**

Seven organisations are classified by DAFF as organic certifiers:

- AUS-QUAL Limited (AUSQUAL)
- Australian Certified Organic (ACO)
- Bio-Dynamic Research Institute (BDRI)
- National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia Certified Organic (NASAA Certified Organic)
- Organic Food Chain (OFC)
- Safe Food Production Queensland (SFQ)
- Tasmanian Organic-Dynamic Producers (TOP).

Some of the certifying organisations have their own standards in addition to the National Standard.

### **Biodynamic food**

Biodynamic farming is a type of organic farming pioneered by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, which places strong emphasis on ecological harmony and environmental sustainability. Biodynamic food is grown with particular composts, preparations and natural activating substances.

### **Where to get help**

- Some supermarkets
- Some greengrocers
- Organic food retailers

**This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:**

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