

SportsNutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen

Organic foods—are they better, safer, more nutritious? That's what many active people want to know. After all, when you are training hard to enhance your performance, you might as well enhance your health at the same time—and that means eating wisely and well. Questions arise: should eating organic foods be a part of your sports diet? This article addresses some questions athletes commonly ask about whether or not to go organic.

To start, what does “organic” actually mean? Organic refers to the way farmers grow and process fruits, vegetables, grains, meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. Only foods that are grown and processed according to USDA organic standards can be labeled “organic”. (Note: The food label terms “natural”, “hormone free” or “free-range” do not necessarily mean “organic”.) Organic farming practices are designed to conserve soil and water and to reduce pollution. For example, organic farmers do not use chemical fertilizers, insecticides or weed killers on crops. Nor do they use growth hormones, antibiotics and medications to enhance animal growth and prevent disease.

Organic fruits and vegetables can cost about 30% more than standard produce, if not more. If you are a hungry athlete who requires a lot of food, you might be wondering: Are organic products worth the extra cost? In terms of taste, some athletes claim organic foods taste better. Taste is subjective and may relate to the fact *freshly grown* foods have more flavor. In terms of nutrition, some research suggests organic foods may have slightly more minerals and antioxidants than conventionally grown counterparts, but the differences are insignificant. You could adjust for the difference by simply eating a larger portion of standard broccoli.

One important reason to buy organic—preferably locally grown organic—is to help sustain the earth and replenish its resources. Buying locally grown foods helps the small farmers earn a better living from their farmland. Otherwise, they can easily be tempted to sell their land for house lots or industrial parks—and there goes beautiful green space.

Yet, if you buy organic foods from a large grocery store chain, you should think about the whole picture. Because organic fruits, for example, are in big demand, they may need to be transported for thousands of miles. This consumes fuel, pollutes the air—and hinders the establishment of a better environment. Does this really fit the ideal vision of “organic”? The compromise is to buy locally grown produce whenever possible. To find the farm stands in your area, visit www.localharvest.com.

A second potential reason to choose organic relates to reducing the pesticide content in your body and the potential risk of cancer and birth defects. The Environmental Protection Agency (www.EPA.gov) has standards that

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require a 100- to 1,000-fold margin of safety for pesticide residues. They have set limits based on scientific data that indicates a pesticide will not cause “unreasonable risk to human health.” According to Richard Bonanno, PhD, agricultural expert at Univ. Mass.-Amherst and a farmer himself, 65% to 75% of conventionally grown produce has *no* detectable pesticides. (When used properly and applied at the right times, pesticides degrade and become inert.) Results from testing vegetable farms in Massachusetts showed no pesticide residues in 100% of the samples. Bonanno reports only 0.5% of conventionally grown foods (but 3-4% of imported foods) are above EPA standards. Yet, watchdog groups such as www.beyondpesticides.org and www.foodnews.org wave red flags and remind us, for example, that small amounts of pesticides can accumulate in the body. This may be of particular concern for children.

Clearly, whether or not to buy organic foods becomes a matter of personal values. Bonanno sees “organic”, in part, as a marketing ploy, with organic foods portrayed as being safer and better. He argues we do not have a two-tier food system in the US—with wealthier people who can afford to buy organic foods as being the recipients of safer foods.

So what's a hungry but poor athlete to do? If you struggle to stay within your food budget, plan to eat a variety of foods, to minimize exposure to a specific pesticide residue. Carefully wash and rinse fruits and vegetables under running water; this can remove 99% of any pesticide residue (depending on the food and the pesticide). You can also peel fruits, such as apples, potatoes, carrots and pears (but then, you also peel off important nutrients). Remove the tops and outer portions of celery, lettuce and cabbage.

For peace of mind, you might want to buy organic versions of the foods you eat most often, such as organic apples if you are a five-a-day apple eater. You could also (sometimes, if not all the time) buy organic versions of the fruits and veggies that are known to have the highest pesticide residue, even after having been washed. According to www.foodnews.org, the “Dirty Dozen” includes these fruits: apples, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, strawberries, red raspberries; and these vegetables: potato, bell peppers, celery, spinach. In comparison, the “Clean Dozen” (with little or no pesticides) includes: banana, kiwi, pineapple, mango, papaya; asparagus, avocado, broccoli, cauliflower, onion, sweet corn, and green peas. (For a complete list of 43 fruits and veggies, see www.foodnews.org.) Eat wisely; and if possible, help save the farms!

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Reference

For additional information

USDA Pesticide Data Program, Annual Summary for Calendar Year 2005
www.ams.usda.gov/science/pdp/status.htm (pdf download)

Agricultural Marketing Service of the US Department of Agriculture
Pesticide Data Program
www.ams.usda.gov/science/pdp

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
www.EPA.gov/pesticides

Environmental Working Group
www.ewg.org
www.foodnews.org

Beyond Pesticides (formerly the National Commission Against the Misuse of Pesticides)
www.beyondpesticides.org