

## Organic Foods: Worth the Price?

**Source:** Nutrition: What Every Parent Needs to Know (Copyright © American Academy of Pediatrics 2011)

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Many people prefer to buy **organic** produce and meat out of concerns for their health and the environment. Purchasers generally assume that foods marketed as organic have been grown without synthetic fertilizers and **pesticides** and have not been treated with antibiotics, hormones, or synthetic additives such as dyes and preservatives.

Even foods raised organically, however, may contain pesticides and other contaminants carried by wind, water, or soil residues. In addition, while free of certain contaminants, organic products are not necessarily more nutritious or more flavorful than other foods. Retailers generally demand higher prices for organic foods, but such produce may spoil faster because it is not treated against insects and bacteria.

### **So is buying organic worth the price?**

A small study, in 2008, measured baseline levels of pesticides in the urine of children prior to the study. There were detectable but low levels of some pesticides in the urine of most children before the study began. Their diets were then limited to organic fruits and vegetables, and some corn- and wheat-based products such as pasta and cereal. Because meats and dairy products do not contain significant levels of pesticides, they were not changed in the diet. What were the results? After a week of eating only organic products, urinary pesticide levels decreased significantly.

Does this mean that the increased cost and decreased shelf life of organic foods are justified for all children? The answer is maybe. Children are exposed to pesticides in other ways such as playing on grass in a **park** that has been sprayed for insect control or **drinking water** into which pesticides have leaked.

Measures such as washing and peeling all produce before serving it, buying only domestically grown produce rather than imported, buying from local farmers' markets, and participating in a community garden using organic farming methods can reduce the risk.

Keep in mind, however, that locally grown produce is not always pesticide-free, so look for a label that states that it is organic to minimize pesticide content. If you live in an agricultural area and drink **well water**, testing it for pesticide content may be helpful as well.

Even if pesticides are present, they are often not the major environmental threat to children's health that they once were because of advances in pest management that have lowered that risk considerably. For example, substances that disrupt the growth only of a certain insect that can attack a crop but not harm humans in the process are used in some situations.

Another approach is the use of a particular pheromone (a chemical secreted by animals) that disrupts the mating of some insects. Breeding plants that resist diseases and careful monitoring of residues in soil before planting have also contributed to a reduction in risk.