

Are Organic Foods Safer? Better for You?

Perhaps you've had this experience: You are standing in the produce section of your grocery store with an apple in each hand. Both are red, shiny, and perfectly formed. However, one has a sticker saying that it is "USDA Organic" and the other doesn't. Is the organic apple safer to eat? Is it better for you? And does that "USDA Organic" sticker even mean much?

"Americans' appetite for organic foods has grown steadily over the past few decades," according to the Economic Research Service. "Retail sales of organic foods more than doubled from 1994 to 2014 with a steady uptick of about 10% annual growth in retail sales over the past several years." More than two-thirds of Americans say they have purchased

an organic food product in the past 30 days and industry statistics say that organic foods account for more than 4% of all food purchases. Most consumers of organic food cite health reasons for buying organic.

To earn an organic seal, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a certification process that requires the foods meet strict government standards. These standards regulate how such foods are grown, handled, and processed. Basically organic fruits, vegetables, and grains cannot be grown using synthetic fertilizers, genetic engineering, or irradiation to increase shelf life or to eliminate disease or pests. As you would expect, most synthetic pesticides are also prohibited. For meat products to qualify as organic, livestock cannot have been given antibiotics or growth hormones. Animals must be raised in living conditions accommodating their natural behaviors (like the ability to graze on pasture), and fed 100% organic feed and forage.

The principal downside to organic foods is their cost. As for the upside, the Mayo Clinic says "there is a growing body of evidence that shows some potential health benefits of organic foods when compared with conventionally grown foods. While these studies have shown differences in the food, there is limited information to draw conclusions about how these differences translate into overall health benefits.



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Potential benefits include the following:

- **Nutrients.** Studies have shown small to moderate increases in some nutrients in organic produce. The best evidence of a significant increase is in certain types of flavonoids, which have antioxidant properties.
- **Omega-3 fatty acids.** The feeding requirements for organic livestock farming, such as the primary use of grass and alfalfa for cattle, result in generally higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids, a kind of fat that is more heart healthy than other fats. These higher omega-3 fatty acids are found in organic meats, dairy and eggs.
- **Toxic metal.** Cadmium is a toxic chemical naturally found in soils and absorbed by plants. Studies have shown significantly lower cadmium levels in organic grains, but not fruits and vegetables, when compared with conventionally grown crops. The lower cadmium levels in organic grains may be related to the ban on synthetic fertilizers in organic farming.



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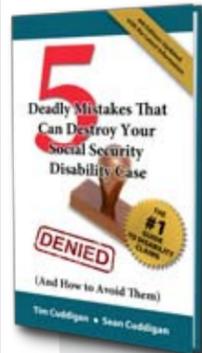
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Organic...cont.

- **Pesticide residue.** Compared with conventionally grown produce, organically grown produce has lower detectable levels of pesticide residue... The difference in health outcomes is unclear because of safety regulations for maximum levels of residue allowed on conventional produce.
- **Bacteria.** Meats produced conventionally may have a higher occurrence of bacteria resistant to antibiotic treatment. The overall risk of bacterial contamination of organic foods is the same as conventional foods."

Advocates for organic foods also maintain that organic farming is better for the environment. The Columbia (University) Climate School argues that "[o]rganic farming is widely considered to be a far more sustainable alternative when it comes to food production. The lack of pesticides and wider variety of plants enhances biodiversity and results in better soil quality and reduced pollution from fertilizer or pesticide run-off." The USDA adds that organic farming practices "[r]educe the risks of human, animal, and environmental exposure to toxic materials."

So the bottom line on the choice between organic and non-organic foods is like so many other life decisions: there are tradeoffs. Organic food is somewhat safer, somewhat more nutritious and better for the environment. Is it worth the higher cost? That is a decision you will have to make when you're holding those two apples.



In-Person Disability Hearings Set to Resume

Live, in-person Social Security disability claims hearings will start up again in the spring, the Social Security Administration says. For the past two years, due to the COVID pandemic, hearings have only been held remotely—by video or phone. The in-person hearings could resume as early as May 4 after the SSA reached an agreement with the union representing Social Security Administration Law Judges. The judges have held hundreds of thousands of virtual hearings since the start of the pandemic.

Judges may voluntarily schedule in-person hearings starting in May and all judges are set to return to their offices beginning June 3. Hearings may continue to be a mix of in-person and virtual proceedings for the foreseeable future. The SSA says claimants who prefer an in-person hearing will be given that opportunity or they can still request a virtual hearing, if they have an underlying medical condition that puts them at higher risk of contracting COVID-19, or may otherwise feel uncomfortable with travel or appearing in-person before a judge.

Additionally, the SSA plans to reopen its more than 1,200 field offices starting March 30. However, the date could change since union negotiations are ongoing and the situation with the pandemic continues to evolve.



Comfort Food From the kitchen of Janet Cuddigan

Veggie Pizza Squares

Baked on a single sheet pan, this recipe is a breeze to make and tasty, too.

- 2 (10 ounce) cans refrigerated crescent roll dough
- 1 (8 ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- 2/3 cup mayonnaise
- 1 teaspoon dried dill weed
- 1 teaspoon minced onion
- 1/2 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1/2 cup chopped cauliflower
- 1/2 cup chopped broccoli
- 1/2 cup chopped green bell peppers
- 1 (8 ounce) package shredded Cheddar cheese

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Unroll crescent roll dough on a small baking sheet. Arrange into a single layer to serve as a crust. Bake in the preheated oven 10 minutes, or until puffed and lightly browned. In a medium bowl, mix cream cheese, mayonnaise, dill weed, onion and garlic. Spread the cream cheese mixture over the crescent roll dough crust. Layer with cauliflower, broccoli and green peppers. Top with Cheddar cheese. Chill in the refrigerator until serving.

Adapted from allrecipes.com

Scam Alert: IRS Imposters



Here we are again knee deep in tax season, so it's a good time of the year to be aware of IRS imposter scams.

If you get a call from someone who says he or she is from the IRS and you owe back taxes, they are trying to swindle you. Even if caller ID shows a Washington D.C. area code or they know some of your Social Security number, it is fake. The IRS says they never make initial contact by phone about taxes owed. They will send you a letter.

Furthermore, the IRS will never ask you to pay with a wire transfer or prepaid debit card. Nor will they ask you to pay with a credit card over the phone. So don't do it. Once you have wired the money or sent a debit card, your money is gone—never to be seen again.

The Federal Trade Commission also warns that "[i]n the latest twist on a scam related to Social Security numbers, scammers claim to be able to suspend or cancel the victim's SSN. It's yet another attempt by con artists to frighten people into returning 'robocall' voicemails."

Millions of dollars and sensitive personal information have been lost to scammers by thousands of Americans; don't be another one of them.

Word Search

S P I K E S N E K C A L B P
I I M P E L S P E E K I N G
E S E I M R A N K E D A R G
S E L G U T P A R T N E R S
T L S N E S H E A V E A O E
A G G R E S S I V E N E S S
C O N T E M P L A T I V E S
C A Y G U R N E D I W S M T
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A I S R E V O L C X D T O F
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