

ORGANIC MEAT, MILK AND EGGS

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The new National Organic Program (NOP) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) describes organic foods as being produced by alternative methods compared with conventionally produced foods. Organic meat, milk, and eggs are defined as coming from animals that are raised under certain standards in which the following are prohibited: use of growth hormones or antibiotics, use of feeds grown with most conventional pesticides, use of petroleum-based or sewage sludge-based fertilizers, use of bioengineered feedstuffs, and use of ionizing radiation (USDA-AMS, 2002). Also, in the livestock standard, organically raised animals must have access to the outdoors, including access to pasture for ruminants. The regulations require that agricultural products labeled as organic originate from farms or handling operations that are certified by a USDA-accredited State or private entity.

An important point is that NOP is a marketing program, not a food safety, nor food healthfulness program. The NOP regulations do not address nutritional content of foods, food safety nor animal well-being.

The United States has consistently had among the safest and most healthful food supplies in the world. All meat, poultry, and eggs produced in the USA or imported, and sold in interstate commerce, regardless of the production practices, must meet regulations of the USDA for safety, wholesomeness and accurate labeling. Milk for interstate shipment must meet regulations of the Food and Drug Administration for safety. Therefore, it is erroneous to imply that organic foods are safer and more healthful than conventional foods, or vice versa.

The nutritional quality of organic meat, milk, and eggs is comparable to that of conventionally produced meat, milk, and eggs. In a review, Woese et al. (1997) concluded that, although the data were limited, there were no major differences in nutrient composition among foods produced through organic versus conventional methods. However, studies that have been conducted on the microbiological safety of organic foods show evidence for concern. A recent study by Heuer et al. (2001) showed that organic broiler flocks could potentially introduce *Campylobacter* to the processing line upon arrival at the plants.

In conclusion, while organic foods offer the consumer a choice, there is no evidence of nutritional difference between organic and conventionally produced meat, milk, and eggs. Furthermore, there is no evidence that organic foods are any safer than conventional foods. In fact, there may be more risk associated with the use of organic foods due to their potential for introducing *Campylobacter* or other harmful microorganisms into the food chain.

References:

Heuer O.E., K. Pedersen, J.S. Andersen, and M. Madsen. 2001. Prevalence and antimicrobial susceptibility of thermophilic *Campylobacter* in organic and conventional broiler flocks. Letters in Applied Microbiology 33(4), 269-274.

USDA-AMS. Organic Food Standards and Labels: The Facts. April 2002. USDA-AMS The National Organic Program. <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Consumers/brochure.html>

Woese, K., D. Lange, C. Boess, and K.W. Bogl. 1997. A comparison of organically and conventionally grown foods – results of a review of the relevant literature. J. Sci. Food Agric. 74:281-293