



FACT SHEET

COMPARING CONVENTIONAL AND ORGANIC DAIRY

America's dairy farmers are dedicated to providing wholesome, high-quality milk and dairy foods. All milk in the U.S. is subject to the same strict federal standards for quality, purity and sanitation. The difference between organically and conventionally produced milk is in the production practices used, rather than the quality or nutritional value of the food.¹



UNDERSTANDING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ORGANIC AND CONVENTIONAL

Conventional and organic milk production is very similar in many ways. Whether conventional or organic, farm families have brought the goodness of dairy foods to Americans' tables for generations. Both conventional and organic milk have the same nine essential nutrients and on both conventional and organic dairy farms, animals are well cared for and proper attention is given to the use of natural resources.

The word organic refers to the way farmers grow and raise foods. Milk labeled organic refers to the management practices on the farm where it originated and not the nutritional quality or safety of the milk itself. For dairy foods to be labeled USDA Organic, the dairy farms must meet the requirements of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Organic Program.² The differences in organic and conventional dairy products are found in the farm management practices. Dairy farm families make different decisions on their dairy farms – choosing what is best for their cows, families, employees and community. Some dairy farm families choose farming methods which allow them to qualify as organic. These farmers are required to follow standards established by the USDA.

Studies maintain there are no major nutritional differences between conventional and organic milk. No matter which variety people choose, milk is safe, delicious and nutritious.



Many factors influence the price of foods, including milk. Organic foods are often priced higher than conventionally dairy foods. One reason organic milk is more costly is because organic farms must follow the standards that are required to receive the “USDA Organic” label, which may result in higher production costs for the farmer, so those costs are reflected at retail.

While you may think that some products, such as organic milk, come from farms closer to your home, this may not necessarily be the case. 95% of all dairy farms are family-owned and operated. Because there are fewer organic farms than conventional farms, the milk can travel a greater distance to retail. This milk is typically ultra-pasteurized or put through ultra-high temperature processing to preserve freshness. Most conventional milk also comes from local, family-owned farms and is on store shelves in about two days.

Nutritional Value

Both conventional and organic milk offer a powerful package of calcium and eight other essential nutrients. Organic milk is just one choice among many in the dairy case.

When evaluating possible health claims, research does not support a health advantage of organic over conventional milk for any segment of the population.³

Milk Safety

Strict government standards, including pasteurization, ensure that milk is pure, safe, and nutritious. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and USDA confirm that conventionally-produced food is equally as safe as organically produced food.⁴

Organic milk refers to farm management practices and not to the nutritional quality or safety of the milk itself – these practices do include guidelines on no use of pesticides, antibiotics, hormones or GMOs. All milk is strictly tested for antibiotics on the farm and at the milk bottling plant. Any milk that tests positive is disposed of immediately and never reaches the food supply.

All milk naturally contains very small amounts of hormones and a survey of retail milk shows there are no meaningful differences in milk composition, including hormone levels, between organic and traditional milk.⁵

Taste and Freshness

The taste of milk, regardless of whether it is organically or conventionally produced, can differ slightly from bottle to bottle and season to season. Factors that may impact taste include location of the farm, breed of the cow, variations in cows’ feed, and even the time of year. Milk that is ultra-pasteurized for longer shelf-life may also have a slightly different taste. People should do their own “taste test” to see which kinds of milk they prefer.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

NATIONAL ORGANIC PROGRAM: WWW.AMS.USDA.GOV/NOP

USDA, ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE, BASED ON INFORMATION FROM USDA-ACCREDITED STATE AND PRIVATE ORGANIC CERTIFIERS.

1. USDA/AMS. NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARDS FINAL RULE.

2. USDA/AMS. 2002, OCT. NATIONAL ORGANIC PROGRAM ORGANIC PRODUCTION AND HANDLING STANDARDS. UPDATED OCTOBER 2011.

3. COLLINS, K. 2006, NOV. ORGANIC MILK: WHAT YOU GET FOR THE MONEY. NUTRITION NOTES. AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR CANCER RESEARCH.

4. ADA. 2009, SEPT. ORGANIC FOODS VERSUS CONVENTIONAL FOODS.

5. VICINI, J ET AL. 2008. SURVEY RETAIL MILK COMPOSITION AFFECTED BY LABEL CLAIMS REGARDING FARM-MANAGEMENT PRACTICES. J AM DIET ASSOC.108:1198-1203.