

Is going organic worth the extra cost?

EMILY SMITH September 19 2019



Conventionally grown leafy greens could have a higher risk of pesticide residue. *Photo: iStock*

More Australians than ever are splurging on organic produce, industry figures show.

Across the country, we spend \$2.6 billion annually on organic fruit, vegetables and household goods, a recent report from business group Australian Organic shows.

This represents an increase of 46 per cent from 2012, with six in 10 households now choosing to regularly buy organic produce.

The most in-demand organic items included vegetables, beef, non-alcoholic beverages, fruit, ready-to-eat foods, nuts and cosmetics or health products.

Consumers who bought organic foods believed they were fresher, better quality and tastier, as well as being safer for the environment, the research found.

Nearly half of organic shoppers said personal health was also a consideration, particularly younger consumers.

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Thin-skinned fruit such as berries might be worth the extra cost for organic. *Photo: iStock*

Now that Organic Awareness Month is in full swing, it's time to look at whether it's worth going organic.

Which produce should we buy organic?

Accredited practising dietitian Bronwen Greenfield says many people abide by the "dirty dozen" and "clean 15" lists when deciding which products to buy organic.

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"The 'dirty dozen' are foods recommended to be purchased organic as they have greater exposure to pesticides. The 'clean 15' have the least," she says.

However, the list is based on produce in the US, where chemical residue limits are not as strict as in Australia, where they are regulated by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand.

"All produce in Australia, whether it is organic or not, is monitored to ensure pesticide lev-

els remain below maximum residue limits and do not pose a threat to our health," Greenfield says.

If you're still keen to go organic, however, there are some basic guidelines to keep in mind when deciding which produce is worth the extra money.

If someone wants to choose more organic produce ... then by all means go for it.

Accredited practising dietitian Bronwen Greenfield

A 2011 study in the *Journal of Toxicology* found that foods with a large surface area, such as leafy greens, have more space for pesticides to make their way in.

Produce with skins we eat, such as apples, or thin skins, such as berries, may contain higher amounts of residual pesticides.

In contrast, fruits and vegetables with thick skins, such as pineapple and avocado, are less likely to be penetrated by pesticides, so may not be worth the extra money.



Overall it's important to eat as much fruit and veg as possible. *Photo: iStock*

Buying organic on the cheap

For 67 per cent of households, cost continues to be biggest barrier to buying organic

foods, the report by Australian Organic says.

To avoid a hefty grocery bill, Greenfield suggests choosing foods that are in season and keeping an eye on daily specials.

Buying from local farmers' markets, or direct from farmers, freezing produce and growing your own organic produce can all be ways to make organic food cheaper.

Is eating organic important?

While it's true that organic food offers environmental benefits, Greenfield argues the nutritional benefits aren't necessarily significant.

"Overall systematic reviews of the topic have not been able to show any clinical or physiologically relevant differences between individuals who consume conventionally farmed versus organically farmed foods," she says.

"From a health perspective, both organic and conventionally grown foods can provide us with all the nutrients we need as part of a healthy, balanced diet.

"Of course, eating organic produce can provide environmental benefits, but if we're just focusing on health there is not enough evidence to confirm claims."

Greenfield sees eating organic as a personal preference.

"If someone wants to choose more organic produce based on availability, cost, taste and environmental concerns, then by all means go for it. However, from a nutritional standpoint alone, I don't think it's a necessity for everyone to go organic," she says.

The bottom line

In Australia, existing regulations minimise pesticides levels in the food chain.

If you decide to try organic regardless, opt for leafy greens and thin-skinned fruit and veg rather than thick-skinned produce, or items you remove the skin of before eating.

It's also important to look for the Australian Certified Organic "bud" logo, to ensure you're buying truly certified organic products.

Either way, consumers should focus on eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, whether or not they are organic, Greenfield says.

"I don't want to create any more barriers toward eating fresh fruit and vegetables by creat-

ing lists, because at the end of the day, many Australians aren't getting enough anyway," she says.

The dirty dozen 2019

The dirty dozen list is an annual ranking of fruits and vegetables with the most pesticides, released by the Environmental Working Group in the US.

1. Strawberries
2. Spinach
3. Kale
4. Nectarines
5. Apples
6. Grapes
7. Peaches
8. Cherries
9. Pears
10. Tomatoes
11. Celery
12. Potatoes

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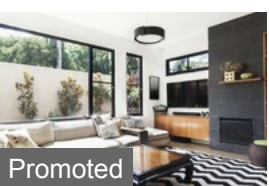
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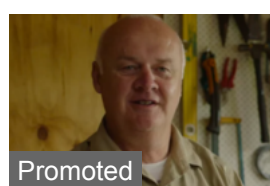


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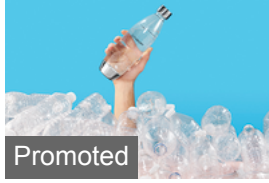
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