

The cost of organic food

A new Consumer Reports study reveals how much more you'll pay. Hint: Don't assume that organic is always pricier.

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Many consumers would likely buy more organic food if it weren't so expensive. We recently conducted a unique price study, comparing the cost of a market basket of organic goods—fruits and vegetables, meat and chicken, milk, and other edibles—to their conventional counterparts at eight different national, regional, and online grocers.

We compared more than 100 product pairings in all. On average, organic foods were 47 percent more expensive, but the range was huge. In a couple of instances, the organic product was actually cheaper, by as much as 13 percent for honey at Amazon Fresh. In fact, depending on where we shopped, we found organic lettuce carrots, maple syrup, olive oil, and cream cheese for the same price or less than their conventional counterparts.



Photo: Levi Brown

At the other extreme, organic zucchini cost a whopping 303 percent more than nonorganic at Fresh Direct. (The two tables below cover eight grocers. [Table 1](#) looks at Amazon Fresh, Fresh Direct, Harris Teeter, and Peapod; [table 2](#) includes Price Chopper, Safeway, Walmart, and Whole Foods.)

In Consumer Reports' most recent supermarkets survey of nearly 63,000 subscribers, Trader Joe's, Wegmans, Costco, Sprouts Farmers Markets had the best overall prices on organics. But if you don't have access to any of those chains, check out the prices at several stores. As we learned, prices can be dramatically different and change based on weekly promotions.

Read our special report on pesticides in produce, and learn about glyphosate, the most commonly used agricultural pesticide in the U.S. on farms.

Why buy organic?

The primary reason to buy organic is to avoid exposure to chemical pesticide residues. Another reason is to help support family farming methods for plants and animals that are healthier in the long run for the earth's soils and water supply. There are nutritional benefits to certain organic foods as well. A 2014 analysis of multiple studies by the British Journal of Nutrition, for instance, concluded that organic crops contained higher antioxidant levels than their non-organic counterparts.

It's a message that's getting through to both consumers and merchants alike. Since 2012, more than 90 percent of retailers have increased the number of organic foods they sell.

Around eight in 10 households currently buy at least some certified organic products—mostly produce and dairy.

If you're on a budget and have limited resources, you'll get more bang for your organic shopping dollars healthwise by splurging in the following categories:

- **Fruit and vegetables:** Rinsing conventional produce doesn't effectively reduce all pesticide residues. Organic produce isn't treated with synthetic fertilizers or most synthetic pesticides as a matter of course. Buying organic produce can help avoid long-term exposure to such residues.
- **Poultry:** Organic poultry is almost always raised without the routine use of antibiotics—drugs in food that the animals eat—that are triggering a rise in antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Also, organic poultry can't be fed "litter," a mixture of droppings, spilled feed, and feathers, or arsenic drugs.
- **Meat:** Organic cattle aren't raised with routine antibiotics either. That's a plus, but for optimal nutritional benefits look for beef labeled "Grassfed Approved" or "USDA Process Verified grass-fed." Studies suggest that meat from such animals might provide more health benefits than meat from animals fattened on a conventional grain diet.
- **Milk:** Organic milk contains about 60 percent more heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids than non-organic, a benefit that also extends to yogurt and cheese, according to research. Also, organic dairy cows aren't treated with growth hormones nor are they fed a diet containing animal byproducts.

—*Tod Marks*

Going organic: Here's the hit to your wallet

Consumer Reports shopped at select grocers, comparing a market basket of conventional perishables and packaged goods with their organic counterparts. We sought identical brands and sizes, when available, and otherwise chose similar goods. We then calculated the unit price—that is, the cost per pound, per dozen, and so forth. Blank columns mean that both options weren't available. The bottom row shows the average premium for the entire assortment of organic goods at each grocer.

Table 1	Amazon Fresh	Fresh Direct	Harris Teeter	Peapod
Apples (lb.)				
Regular	\$1.66	\$1.66	\$1.66	\$1.66

Organic	\$2.00	\$2.66	\$2.33	\$2.00
% difference	+20%	+60%	+40%	+20%
Bananas (lb.)				
Regular	89 cents	88 cents	65 cents	39 cents
Organic	99 cents	99 cents	89 cents	53 cents
% difference	+11%	+13%	+37%	+36%
Beef (85% lean ground, lb.)				
Regular	\$4.99	\$6.49	\$6.29	\$4.99
Organic	\$8.63	\$9.99	\$9.99	\$6.99
% difference	+73%	+54%	+59%	+40%
Butter (lb.)				
Regular	\$3.98/lb.	\$5.59/lb.		\$2.50/lb.
Organic	\$5.17/lb.	\$6.69/lb.		\$5.69/lb.
% difference	+30%	+20%		+128%
Carrots (baby, lb.)				
Regular	\$1.99		\$1.69	\$1.66
Organic	\$1.99		\$1.69	\$2.49
% difference	0%		0%	+50%
Chicken, whole/cutup (lb.)				
Regular	\$2.48	\$1.99	\$1.69	
Organic	\$4.42	\$3.99	\$4.49	
% difference	+78%	+101%	+166%	
Cream Cheese (8 oz.)				
Regular	\$1.98	\$3.19	\$2.65	
Organic	\$3.29	\$3.49	\$3.00	
% difference	+66%	+9%	+13%	
Eggs (large brown, dozen)				
Regular	\$3.59	\$3.19	\$2.19	\$3.29
Organic	\$5.69	\$5.49	\$6.49	\$4.89
% difference	+58%	+72%	+196%	+49%
Honey (lb.)				
Regular	\$7.36	\$5.32	\$4.49	\$4.64
Organic	\$6.40	\$5.72	\$5.32	\$5.60
% difference	-13%	+8%	+18%	+21%
Iceberg lettuce (head)				
Regular		\$1.99	\$1.79	\$1.79
Organic		\$1.99	\$2.69	\$2.99
% difference		0%	+50%	+67%
Maple syrup (Grade A, pint)				
Regular	\$13.60		\$9.77	\$10.88
Organic	\$20.32		\$11.98	\$10.08
% difference	+49%		+23%	-7%

Milk (half gallon)

Regular	\$2.99	\$2.79	\$2.59	\$2.49
Organic	\$3.58	\$3.99	\$4.19	\$4.09
% difference	+20%	+43%	+62%	+64%

Olive oil (extra virgin, quart)

Regular	\$16.08	\$8.64	\$8.98	\$13.24
Organic	\$17.02	\$13.44	\$10.87	\$13.24
% difference	+6%	+56%	+21%	0%

Strawberries (lb.)

Regular	\$4.99	\$5.99		\$2.50
Organic	\$6.99	\$7.99		\$4.99
% difference	+40%	+33%		+100%

Zucchini (lb.)

Regular	\$2.00	99 cents	62 cents	99 cents
Organic	\$2.89	\$3.99	\$1.31	\$2.00
% difference	+45%	+303%	+111%	+102%

Average premium for organic **+35%** **+58%** **+60%** **+53%**

Table 2	Price Chopper	Safeway	Walmart	Whole Foods
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Apples (lb.)

Regular	\$1.00	\$1.83		
Organic	\$1.20	\$2.20		
% difference	+20%	+20%		

Bananas (lb.)

Regular	59 cents	48 cents	58 cents	79 cents
Organic	79 cents	79 cents	78 cents	99 cents
% difference	+34%	+65%	+34%	+25%

Beef (85% lean ground, lb.)

Regular		\$5.99		\$6.99
Organic		\$8.79		\$9.99
% difference		+47%		+43%

Butter (lb.)

Regular	\$2.99/lb.		\$3.88/lb.	\$3.79/lb.
Organic	\$7.98/lb.		\$6.48/lb.	\$4.39/lb.
% difference	+167%		+67%	+16%

Carrots (baby, lb.)

Regular	\$1.33	\$2.19	\$1.68	
Organic	\$1.99	\$2.19	\$3.48	
% difference	+50%	0%	+107%	

Chicken, whole/cutup (lb.)

Regular	\$1.49	\$1.99		\$2.49
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Organic	\$3.49	\$2.49		\$3.49
% difference	+134%	+25%		+40%
Cream Cheese (8 oz.)				
Regular	\$1.99	\$3.29		\$3.39
Organic	\$3.69	\$3.89		\$3.39
% difference	+85%	+18%		0%
Eggs (large brown, dozen)				
Regular	\$2.49	\$4.39	\$2.68	\$2.99
Organic	\$4.99	\$4.99	\$4.68	\$3.99
% difference	100%	+14%	+75%	+33%
Honey (lb.)				
Regular	\$5.32	\$5.09		\$7.32
Organic	\$6.12	\$5.29		\$7.59
% difference	+15%	+4%		+4%
Iceberg lettuce (head)				
Regular	\$1.99	\$2.79	\$1.68	
Organic	\$3.49	\$3.29	\$2.48	
% difference	+75%	+18%	+48%	
Maple syrup (Grade A, pint)				
Regular	\$11.99	\$11.84	\$10.21	\$11.99
Organic	\$10.65	\$16.97	\$11.84	\$11.72
% difference	-11%	+43%	+6%	-2%
Milk (half gallon)				
Regular	\$2.99	\$2.69	\$2.20	\$2.39
Organic	\$3.99	\$3.49	\$3.88	\$3.99
% difference	+33%	+30%	+76%	+67%
Olive oil (extra virgin, quart)				
Regular	\$16.08	\$8.64	\$8.98	\$13.24
Organic	\$17.02	\$13.44	\$10.87	\$13.24
% difference	+6%	+56%	+21%	0%
Strawberries (lb.)				
Regular	\$2.99	\$4.39		\$4.99
Organic	\$4.99	\$7.69		\$6.99
% difference	+67%	+75%		+40%
Zucchini (lb.)				
Regular	\$1.99	72 cents	\$1.80	
Organic	\$2.99	\$1.12	\$1.98	
% difference	+50%	+56%	+10%	
Average premium for organic	+59%	+34%	+51%	+24%