

Organic Foods: What's the Fuss?

These days we hear so much double-talk about "organic" foods, including "free range" chickens, "hormone free" lamb, and "pesticide free" produce crops. What does "organic" really mean and why is it so important--or is it?

Most people are under the assumption that anything "organic" is superior. This is a nice ideal, and certainly organic products may indeed taste better and be healthier for us. However, you might be surprised to learn that many "certified organic" foods still contain "acceptable" levels of pesticides and chemicals. "Naturally raised" livestock may still be fed non-organic feeds, or be given "acceptable" drugs or hormones.

Let's consider the production of poultry, a popular meat for both humans and pets. "Free range" poultry means the chickens were let out of their cages, however briefly, to roam free. "Naturally fed" may mean simply that the feed for these chickens was scattered on the ground, and they were allowed to scratch and peck the ground to ingest their food "naturally." But was that food "organic?" Were the grains and other components of the chicken feed grown organically? And if they were, was the actual production of the feed done in compliance with regulations to maintain organic standards? What if the chickens ate some bugs while they were scratching the ground? Were those bugs previously exposed to chemicals or pesticides prior to being eaten by the chicken? Let's say the farmer has done everything in his or her power to comply with every regulation concerning the production of organic, free-range chickens. Even the best intentioned farmers cannot control environmental pollutants: air pollution, smog, water pollution, acid rain, etc.

Ok, so then what if we feed our pets a meat source that is not commercially produced, like venison? Chances are good that a deer killed by a hunter will not have had any hormone shots. But what and where did that deer eat? Maybe it grazed on chemically fertilized fields, or near highways where automobile exhaust tainted the nearby plants. Maybe it nibbled on pesticide-sprayed trees, and drank out of polluted streams or ponds.

The USDA regulations concerning what may and may not be labeled as organic are unclear and somewhat confusing, and that's just for individual items, like animals raised for slaughter, and individual vegetables, herbs and fruits. Imagine the difficulty in regulating whether a product like pet food, comprised of several ingredients, may be labeled as organic! Currently, the USDA has agreed to allow pet foods to follow the same rules of organic labeling that apply to human foods. Read more about these rules here.

The majority of us don't seek out organic foods for ourselves and our families to eat. When it comes to feeding our pets, the emphasis should be on fresh, high-quality ingredients. Organic is nice, but not necessary. Grocery store meats and vegetables that are sold for human consumption are far superior to the ingredients contained in most commercially produced pet foods. Switching your pet to a "natural" diet comprised of fresh, raw, human-grade meats and vegetables will provide a multitude of health benefits, regardless of whether or not the individual ingredients you purchase are "certified organic."

Article written by J. Boniface, (c) Copyright 1999, all rights reserved.

Other articles available online at www.auntjeni.com