

# Questions and Answers on Health Foods

What's the story on health foods? As their popularity has increased, so have the questions about them.

What exactly are health foods and where do they come from? Do they cost more than the standard fare and are they actually better for you? Are there legal checks on health food claims?

It's tough to come up with solid answers. The rise of health foods was so sudden that research on the subject lags behind public interest.

There is either scant information or outright disagreement on health foods' definition, cost, and quality, and on regulation by the Government.

Health foods have been on the market for decades, but at this time it is still hard to find a working definition for the term "health food," or a good estimate of the size of the market.

"Everybody eats food for their health," says one food specialist with the USDA's Economic Research Service. "You wouldn't intentionally eat anything that isn't healthy, would you?"

He would prefer less general terms, like "natural" or "organic," but even then you run into definition problems.

Within the health food industry, "natural" pertains to foods that have no additives. "Organic" is more precise—it refers to foods

that not only have no additives, but are also grown without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

Congress and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have tried for years to draft legislation to set standards for the labeling of organic foods, but they've been slowed by controversy over what the term really means.

Some food industry people fear that a federally approved "organic" label on a food item might imply superiority, which, they stress, is not necessarily the case.

For better or worse, there is no question that health food sales have soared in the past decade. USDA observers estimate that the market has jumped about 100 percent in 10 years.

But the health food market is still too small, they say, to warrant extensive study. How small? Again, definition is an added problem. If health food sales include those by the many new vitamin stores, the industry claims about 5 percent of the total food market. Disregarding vitamins, guesses drop to 1 to 3 percent.

Some USDA observers think that the health food surge is leveling off. They cite the rising cost of foods in general, saying that consumers can't afford the higher price of health foods. A spokesman for the

Rodale Press in Pennsylvania, a leader in the health food industry, disagrees. He asserts that the popularity of health foods will continue to mount. He says that farmers are finding less expensive ways to grow organically, so organic food prices will not rise as rapidly as regular foods.

He estimates that there are between 3,000 to 3,500 health food stores in the U.S., but that the vast majority specialize in vitamins "with some food on the side." But he adds that the number of stores selling only natural and organic foods is on the upswing.

For the most part, these stores get their products from small farmers who raise all their food organically—or claim to. Some big farmers do some organic farming on the side. The man from Rodale

estimates that including the part-timers there are about 10,000 organic farmers.

Organic farmers use only natural, rather than chemical, fertilizers. They believe this yields healthier, tastier crops. The farmers say they are finding natural pesticides that are less dangerous, more effective, and less costly than synthetic ones.

As an alternative to DDT and other chemical pesticides, organic farmers recommend the use of beneficial insects to prey on harmful ones, insect traps, interplanting, and insect diseases.

For example, sprinkling the powder of the "milky spore disease" in the ground near crops is said to be a safe and effective way of combating Japanese beetles.

Introduction of certain pest-eating insects is

regarded as considerably effective. Ladybugs, for example, are voracious eaters of aphids. And the praying mantis will gobble down just about any harmful insect.

Some organic farmers use insect traps that are as simple as a hanging cup of molasses and glue, or as sophisticated as electric lights that attract and electrocute night-flyers.

Though natural pesticides may cost less than chemical types, natural fertilizer is generally more expensive than the chemicals. This, and the higher production costs of a farmer dealing in small quantities, drives up the cost of organic foods.

A special science advisor to the Secretary of USDA reported last April that health food prices were ranging from one-third to 2 times higher than regular

supermarket foods. She has doubts about the relative value of organic foods. "Crops produced with the help of chemical fertilizers are equal nutritionally to crops produced by the 'organic' means," she believes.

She reasons that it makes no difference whether a fertilizer is organic or chemical since all elements essential to plant growth enter in the inorganic form. She says of organically grown foods: "There is nothing intrinsically safe about nature."

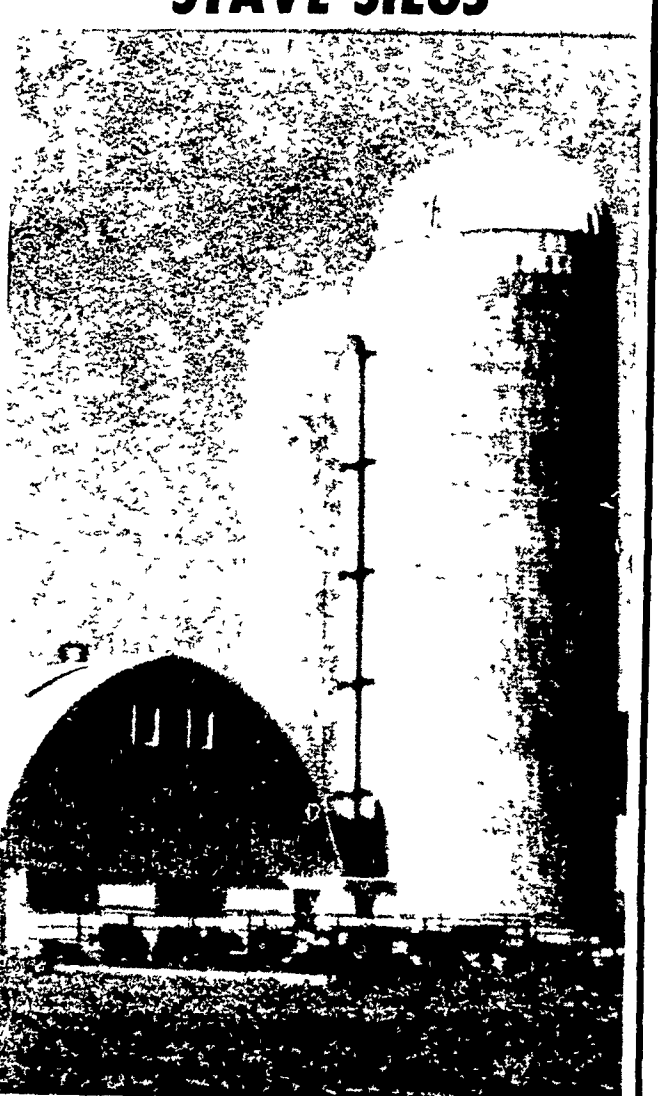
She cautions that "safe use of pesticides is a must." According to her, the risk from bacterial contamination of foods is worse than the risk of consuming pesticide residues or food additives.

Determining whether food

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