

Organic food can sabotage diet and weight-loss

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(PhysOrg.com) -- While organic food may contain fewer, if any, pesticides and additives, consumers mistakenly believe it also has fewer calories, say researchers at the University of Michigan.

"As Americans' waistlines have grown, so has their appetite for organic food," said Norbert Schwarz, professor of marketing at the U-M Ross School of Business. "Labeling food as 'organic' entails a claim about its production, but is silent on its calorie content. Nevertheless, people struggling to cut [calories](#) may turn to organics and possibly consume more calories than they otherwise would."

In an article this month in the journal *Judgment and Decision Making*, Schwarz and U-M colleague Jonathon Schuldt found that Americans believe that organic food contains fewer calories and is, therefore, more appropriate to eat more often than nonorganic food. This is true even when the [nutrition labels](#) for organic and conventional foods list the same amount of calories.

The researchers showed more than 100 study participants nutrition information for a regular Oreo cookie and for one that was made with organic flour and sugar. The nutritional label clearly showed a serving size (two cookies) of 160 calories for both Oreos. Nevertheless, 38 percent of the participants thought that the organic cookie had fewer calories than competing brands, whereas only 12 percent did so without the organic claim.

"Presumably, participants inferred that if organic cookies contain 160 calories, then the calorie content of conventional cookies—whatever the precise amount—is likely to be higher," said Schwarz, who also is a professor of psychology and research professor at U-M's Institute for Social Research. "In addition, participants considered it appropriate to consume Oreo cookies more frequently when they were organic than when they were not."

Schuldt and Schwarz also examined whether the influence of organic claims extend beyond judgments about the food itself to judgments about the need for physical exercise—another major factor in America's obesity crisis.

They asked more than 200 study participants whether a female college student trying to lose weight could forgo her daily post-dinner, three-mile run if she ate an organic dessert or a conventional nonorganic dessert (in both cases, a small bowl of ice cream or a chocolate chip cookie) or skipped the dessert altogether.

The researchers found that taking a day off from running seemed less of a problem to study participants if the college student ate the organic dessert or no dessert at all compared to if she ate the conventional dessert.

"Despite the student's goal of losing weight through regular exercise, participants were more lenient toward her forgoing planned exercise when she had chosen organic over conventional dessert," said Schuldt, a doctoral student in psychology at U-M. "Even more surprising was the fact that leniency toward forgoing exercise was slightly greater when the student chose organic dessert than when she chose no dessert at all."

In all, the U-M study shows that the popularity of organic food is not without its down side.

"As millions of Americans attempt to lose weight, eating organic foods—even desserts—may be viewed as a substitute for actual weight-loss-promoting behaviors," Schuldt said. "Our findings suggest that organic claims may not only foster lower calorie estimates and higher consumption intentions, but they may also convey that one has already made progress toward one's weight-loss goal, thus undermining subsequent action."

More information: Research article
journal.sjdm.org/10/10509/jdm10509.pdf

Provided by University of Michigan

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