

Organic food label imparts 'health halo,' study finds

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Don't judge food by its organic label because "organic" doesn't necessarily mean good it's for you. Yet a new study by Jenny Wan-Chen Lee, a graduate student in Cornell's Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, finds that consumers persist in believing that foods labeled "organic" are healthier and lower in fat.

This is an example of the "halo effect," a psychology term used to describe how the perception of one trait can influence perceptions of other traits of an individual or object. Research has shown that people tend to consume more calories at fast-food restaurants claiming to serve "healthier" foods, compared with the amount they would eat at a typical burger joint. Similarly, for some shoppers, organic foods benefit from a positive "health halo" that leads them to perceive organic-labeled [food](#) as being higher in fiber, lower in fat and calories -- and worth the higher cost.

Lee presented the research April 10 at the Experimental Biology 2011 Meeting in Washington, D.C., based on a study co-authored by Brian Wansink, professor of marketing and of applied economics, and Cornell postdoctoral associate Mitsuru Shimizu and published in the *Journal of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology*.

In a double-blind, controlled trial, the researchers asked 144 shoppers to compare what they believed to be regular and organic chocolate sandwich cookies, plain yogurt and [potato chips](#). All the products were organic, but they were labeled as either "regular" or "organic."

Participants rated each product on 10 attributes and gave their opinions on taste, perception of fat content, estimation of calories contained and price.

Study participants favored nearly all of the health-related taste characteristics of foods labeled "organic," although they were identical to those labeled "regular," confirming Lee's halo hypothesis. Organic-labeled foods were judged to have an average of 60 fewer calories than regular food.

Lee says that organic [snack foods](#) may not, in fact, be healthier than their nonorganic counterparts, and that the organic label may actually lead consumers to overeat by allowing them to feel entitled to indulge. She advises consumers to pay attention to the nutrition facts panel for accurate nutritional information.

Provided by Cornell University

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