

# Individuals may consider organic an important factor when defining healthy food

8 January 2015, by Barbara Benham

When it comes to defining healthy foods, some individuals may see organic as key. This is according to a study led by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) at the Bloomberg School of Public Health. They examined consumers' understanding of healthy food and found that many thought organic was an important factor in deciding whether or not a particular food item is healthy. They also found that information about organic foods may compete with other healthy eating messages. In addition, some participants associated negative health outcomes with consuming non-organic foods.

The results are featured in the December 2014 issue of *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment*.

For this qualitative study—which was part of a larger research project on healthy [food](#) purchasing in a underserved, low-income neighborhood in Baltimore—researchers interviewed 30 adults about their understanding of healthy food. Twelve respondents included organic—or common characteristics of organic food—in their definition of [healthy food](#), even though many of them did not have access to organic foods due to poor availability and affordability. Notably, all but one of the responses was unprompted. As for availability the main grocery store located in the participants' neighborhood only had one organic product at the time of the study - frozen strawberries.

"People's conceptions of healthy eating are very complex, and this study shows that organic can play an important role even when people don't have access or the means to purchase organic food," says Sarah Rodman, MPH, lead author and a CLF-Lerner Fellow at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. "Interviewees described nutritious and organic as two, sometimes conflicting, elements of what makes a food healthy. This is one example of the myriad, sometimes conflicting messages that make it difficult to decide

what to eat."

The term "organic" refers to how a food was produced, and is not an indicator of a food's nutritional quality. Organic foods are generally produced without hormones, antibiotics, synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and contain no genetically modified ingredients, but are not necessarily more nutritious than other foods. Those interviewed for the study mentioned many of these attributes in their interviews.

Respondents framed most of the health benefits of eating organic in terms of avoiding the harmful effects of eating non-organic foods. Eating non-organic foods was thought to contribute to cancer, obesity, abnormal growth and development, allergies and mental health issues, due to the presence of pesticides, hormones, antibiotics and preservatives.

"This study highlights how important it is for those crafting dietary messages to take into account consumers' perceptions of the healthfulness of [organic food](#)," says Anne Palmer, MAIA, co-author of the paper and director of the Food Communities and Public Health program at the CLF. "In order to empower consumers to make healthy choices, we need to create dietary advice that is culturally sensitive, based on economically accessible foods, and takes into account the many competing messages about diet and health that bombard consumers on a regular basis."

**More information:** Rodman, S. O., Palmer, A. M., Zachary, D. A., Hopkins, L. C. and Surkan, P. J. (2014), "They Just Say Organic Food Is Healthier": Perceptions of Healthy Food among Supermarket Shoppers in Southwest Baltimore. *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment*, 36: 83–92. doi: 10.1111/cuag.12036

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