Organic Beef

Should I be buying organic beef?

Canadian beef is nutritious to eat and is part of a balanced diet. Lean beef is full of nutrients, 14 that we need every day, including zinc for healthy growth, iron for oxygen and protein to build and repair your body. Beef producers use a variety of production approaches to provide consumers with the beef that they prefer. One of these approaches is organic agriculture. Canadian beef is safe and nutritious, whether it is produced organically or conventionally. Regardless of its production method, all beef is subject to the same rules of inspection, regulations and guidelines.

Is organic food more nutritious?

Many consumers perceive organic foods as more nutritious than conventional foods, yet studies have not found any substantial nutritional difference in the nutrient quality between organically and conventionally produced foodstuffs. That is the conclusion of a recent study *Nutritional quality of organic foods: a systematic review*, published in the September 2009 issue of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. From a total of 52,471 articles published over 50 years on organic foods (crops and livestock), the study identified 55 studies that were of satisfactory quality. An analysis of those studies on livestock products found no evidence of a difference in nutrient content between organically and conventionally produced livestock products. Organic products in Canada are governed by the Organic Products Regulations, 2009 (SOR-2009-176). These standards apply to beef production.

How is organic beef regulated?

The Organic Product Regulations legally require organic products to be certified according to the national standards for organic agriculture if the products are traded across provincial or international borders. These national standards are also mandatory for any product that bears the Canadian Organic Logo and organic trade within provinces which have adopted the national standards at the provincial level. In other provinces, organic products sold within the province of origin are subject to provincial organic regulations, the *Consumer Packaging and Labelling Regulations* and the *Food and Drug Regulations*.

The national standards for organic agriculture are made up of two documents:

1. CAN/CGSB 32.310: Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards which details the practices that are acceptable in organic agriculture production.
2. CAN/CGSB 32.311: Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances List, which lists the substances that are permitted for use.

A farm is issued organic certification status by an accredited certification body. Cattle producers who wish to run an organic operation would get an application package from a certification body and apply for organic status.

3. Canadian Organic Growers; Provincial Organic Products Standards & Regulations
What are the similarities and differences between conventional and organic beef production?

The Cow-Calf Phase
Beef production is a cycle that starts with the cow-calf operation. The cow-calf phase is virtually identical in both organic and conventional production. Most calving takes place outdoors and the cows then graze on open pasture and the calves nurse. In the organic operation, the pasture must be certified organic. When the calves reach a weight of approximately 500 to 600 pounds, they are weaned from their mothers and graze on pasture.

The Backgrounding Phase
After weaning, calves spend the winter on hay-based diets until their weight increases to about 900 pounds. This process is known as backgrounding and is common to both conventional and organic production. In the organic process, all feed must be certified organic.

The Feedlot Operation
Most conventionally produced cattle are transferred to a feedlot where they are fed grain-based diets for about 120 days prior to slaughter. These grain rations help produce consistent, high-quality beef. In an organic system, cattle may also be fed grain rations although the grains must be certified organic. Most often, cattle in the organic system will remain on the same farm during this stage.

Living conditions
Both conventional and organic production methods are required to take into account the physiological and behavioral welfare of livestock. Both production methods require appropriate housing, and conditions that allow for exercise, freedom of movement, and access to pasture, fresh air, natural daylight, appropriate bedding and resting areas, and shelter from harsh weather.

Feeds and feed supplements
Both methods of production require that the diet being fed to cattle be nutritionally balanced and of high quality to meet the nutritional requirements of the animal. The main difference is that organic livestock must receive 100% of their feedstuffs from organic sources. In both conventional and organic production, calves are often provided vitamin and mineral supplements to maintain health. In organic production, vitamins and minerals should all be from non-synthetic sources. Organic production also bans substances used to promote growth such as feed medications or veterinary drugs, including hormonal growth promotants and antibiotics administered at low levels to prevent disease and enhance growth. Conventional beef production permits the use of hormonal growth promotants, and veterinary products that have been approved by Health Canada. For more information on antibiotics and hormonal growth promotants, see Canada Beef’s Antibiotics and Hormonal Growth Promotants factsheets, at www.beefinfo.org.