



Organic Pregnancy

Question: I just can't afford high quality prenatal supplements and to buy all organic food. If I eat well and mostly organic do I really need the supplements? If you had to pick and choose, what would you say are the most important foods to buy organic?

You have great questions, and I hear these concerns often. We want to give our babies the absolute best of everything, but most of us must prioritize our resources. Nutritional resources for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers are richer than ever in the Madison area, but it can feel as if you have to be rich to benefit from them!

It is a standard recommendation that all pregnant women take a daily prenatal vitamin. High quality, food-based prenatal supplements that are easily absorbed (do not nauseate you) and do not contain fillers or artificial dyes are available in the Co-op. Even organic supplements are now available. While it is true that quality supplements can range from \$50 to \$100 every one-to-three months, it has been my observation that even women with good diets notice a difference when taking them. They may notice increased energy, clarity, improved sleep, or fewer food cravings.

Your own mind and body are your truest guides. If your diet is ample in organic, pasture-grazed, free-range animal foods, nuts and seeds, and fresh, fruits and vegetables, and you get regular outside activity, you may not need a supplement. Not all women need a supplement every day or need the full dose. I suggest experimenting. I also suggest you work with your midwife, nurse practitioner, or physician to individualize supplementation. A thorough review of your food choices, prenatal lab-work results, and pregnancy symptoms may actually indicate a need for extra supplementation. If you're tired even when you wake up, you may benefit from added iron. If you're experiencing lower leg or foot cramps, you may benefit from added calcium/magnesium. You may benefit from supplemental essential fatty acids, especially omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3s are formed in the chloroplasts of green leaves and algae and are abundant in seafood (sadly rife with its own health and exploitation issues) and certain nuts and seeds, particularly flaxseeds and walnuts. If you are vegan or vegetarian, you may require supplementation with vitamin B12, iron, and calcium. You can make your iron and calcium go further (whether in supplement or food form) by not ingesting them at the same time of day, because these minerals diminish each other's bioavailability.

The organic label, like any label, conceals complicated realities. If we look beyond the label, we see some organic food factories owned by conglomerates such as Coca Cola or M&M-Mars offering organic food products at competitive cost, but not necessarily less cost to consumer, grower, land and animal health (see www.familyfarmdefenders.org and click on Corporate Organics.)

Looking further beyond the organic label, we see part of the reason why so many of us cannot afford a completely certified organic diet. Since October 2002, the labels "100% Organic," "Organic," and "Made with Organic" have required USDA approval. USDA certification is an annual expense in time and money imposed upon producers and handlers and passed on to consumers. Certification is ideally a good public protection, especially if you do not personally know the farm, farmers, and handlers who bring you your food. Government subsidy of these costs in some European countries makes organic food the norm in supermarkets. But don't hold your breath waiting for similar public health priorities in the U.S. The USDA finds it necessary to include the following caveat on its consumer information page

for the National Organic Program: “USDA makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food.”

You and I, however, know that feeding animals organs from their own species, chicken feathers, saw dust, chicken manure, cotton, stale pizza dough, potato chips, candy bars, bubble gum (in the aluminum foil wrappers), and other industry wastes, while perhaps “conventional” for factory farms, is not normal. Normal food is organic food. Organic food is the food human beings ate before post-war petrochemical companies needed to find new venues.

All of the above leaves little question in my mind that, if you eat animal foods, prioritizing organic milk, cheese, meat, and eggs that come from pasture-grazed and free-range animals will yield the greatest returns on your investment. While conventional fruit and vegetable growers may use harmful pesticides and antibiotic laden manure sludge on croplands (residues of which we know are taken up by plants), many pesticides can be washed off and you can choose not to buy certain commercial produce. Among the most affected crops are apples, strawberries, soybeans, corn, and potatoes (see www.organicconsumersassociation.org). Furthermore, plants do not concentrate environmental toxins the way animals do, due to the fat-soluble nature of many persistent chemicals.

Given the fat-solubility of environmental pollutants, low fat meat is best, and the more grass in a animal’s diet, the lower the fat. Likewise, the more grass they feed on, the higher the amount of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), vitamin E and betacarotene in their products. Compared with grass, grain has far fewer omega-3 fatty acids. Sixty percent of the fatty acids in grass are omega-3s. Omega-3s play a vital role in every cell and system in your body and are vital for your baby’s brain development. People who have ample amounts of omega-3s in their diet are less likely to have high blood pressure, suffer from depression, schizophrenia, attention deficit disorder (hyperactivity), and Alzheimer’s. It has been estimated that only 40 percent of Americans consume an adequate supply of omega-3 fatty acids. Twenty percent have blood levels so low that they cannot be detected. Vitamin E is a natural preservative, and along with fewer bacterial infections in uncrowded, free-range animals, it is credited in international research with less spoilage and safer meat consumption. Finally, the more grass in their diet, the higher the creation of a cancer-fighting fat called CLA. In a large Finnish study, women who had the highest levels of CLA in their diet had a 60 percent lower risk of breast cancer than those with the lowest levels.

Exposure to pasture is a crucial ingredient in animal diets, as many research findings prove. The research is less clear about the quantity of grass or pasture time needed to correlate with nutritional advantages. Totally grass-fed is rarely possible, given seasonal climates and other farming realities. Personally, I try to support a principle I learned from farmers in Norway: happy animals make happy milk and other foods.

We are so fortunate to live in a place rich with local farmers and growers who bring us normal food if we choose it. You can access them on the web (Google “farmer + WI”), at farmers’ markets, in the Reader or other free publications (Farm Fresh Atlas, Sustainable Times), and on the Coop shelves. Ask about their practices – they may farm organically and humanely but not carry the certified organic label. They may also be more within your economic reach than you think.

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This text was originally published in the Willy Street Co-op Reader in the **Ask the Midwife** column, where Ingrid Andersson of Community Midwives, LLC in Madison, answers questions on pregnancy, childbirth and related topics. More of these articles can be found at Ingrid’s website: www.gentlehomebirth.org