



## ORGANICS FOR ATHLETES: WORTH THE HYPE?

BY JENNIFER MEDLEY

The term "organic" is currently as common a marketing catchphrase as "new and improved," so the question usually lingers: "Is organic all hype?"

Sure, it might be a word that's becoming overplayed, but when getting down to the nitty-gritty, the reasons for buying and eating organic are unwavering, none the least for athletes, for whom quality is usually a top factor when deciding what to put in their bodies. "You are what you eat" has literal meaning when you're being powered by food fuel—with muscles constantly being broken down and rebuilt, every micro- and macro-nutrient matters.

### AVOIDING THE YUCKY STUFF

Organic fruits and vegetables, unlike conventional, are grown without toxic pesticides, herbicides, fungicides or chemical fertilizers. Despite debates over levels considered dangerous in humans, chemical residue has been

linked to such issues as neurotoxicity, endocrine and immune system problems and reproductive disorders.

As for animal products, buying organic increases the odds that the chicken on your plate escaped crowded factory farm-type settings in which it was pumped with antibiotics. Antibiotic residue isn't great for us humans because overexposure could mean a negligible response to antibiotics if they're needed to battle a future illness.

Milk drinkers note that organic cows aren't given artificial growth hormones, such as rBGH (recombinant bovine growth hormone), to make them produce more milk. Inadvertent consumption of such hormones is thought to affect hormone balances in women.

### UPPING THE ANTE

The nutrient value of organic produce is significantly higher than conventionally grown produce—studies vary as to exact numbers, but that could mean up to 70 percent more vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. The composting and crop rotation in organic farming help maximize minerals in the soil, the opposite of chemically treated soil that's been stripped of its goodness.

Dietary nutrients obviously keep bodily functions working properly, but more antioxidants specifically mean more cancer protection since they help mop up free radicals in the body, which is especially important for athletes.

The milk and beef from organic cows is likewise more nutritious—grass-fed beef is especially higher in heart-healthy Omega-3s,

as is the case with free-range, organic chicken and eggs. A plus is that organic animals aren't fed animal by-products, the source of mad cow disease.

### CLEANER PERFORMANCE FUEL

Reasons for going organic pertain to anyone regardless of athletic intentions, but athletes especially benefit. How? Removing stress from the body is essential to quick regeneration. Without toxins such as pesticides or herbicides consumed, they become an added stress the body must eliminate, so avoiding them from the get-go lets the body focus on more important things.

Additionally, by avoiding anything that might mess with hormone levels, you stay away from hormonal imbalances, cellular mutagens and micronutrient malnutrition, all of which could interfere with performance health down the road.

It ends up being less about what organic food can do, and more about what organic food hopefully won't do.



### LOOK WHO'S GOING GREEN

➤ Alejandra Jimenez and George Reagan of CityTri recycle all DAGs and chips used at events. CityTri is also a member of the Park Slope Food Co-op in Brooklyn. All food served at races comes from the co-op and is 100 percent organic. [www.citytri.com](http://www.citytri.com)

➤ As part of its Triple Crown Project to preserve the Pacific Crest, the Continental Divide and the Appalachian Trail, Bear Naked launched a new line of Trail Mix. According to the company, "Each Trail Mix variety contains zero trans fat and no preservatives, hydrogenated oils, cholesterol, artificial flavors or high fructose corn syrup." It has also partnered with the National Arbor Day Foundation to plant 50,000 new trees in areas of California and Michigan that were damaged by forest fires. [www.bearnaked.com](http://www.bearnaked.com)

## THE GREEN ATHLETE

Of course, the number-one reason behind the organic movement is environmental concern. Lowering chemical pollution means better soil and cleaner water systems. Also, animals are usually treated more humanely in an organic environment—even for non-vegetarians, it should be a nice thought that animals have access to fresh air and healthy pastures. And if nothing else sells you on it, do a taste test and you might just find that organically grown/raised products have more flavor.

If you don't always buy organic, an alternative way to show eco-concern is to try to buy local and seasonal. Less transit time minimizes squandered natural resources, plus fewer pesticides are used when a food isn't in transit for eons.

Lastly, keep up to date on which fruits and veggies pose the highest contaminant risk—The Environmental Working Group ([www.foodnews.org](http://www.foodnews.org)) puts out periodical “Top 12” lists that highlights crops highest and lowest in pesticides.

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## ORGANIC IN HARTFORD

### THIS RACE DIRECTOR REALLY COOKS

The more natural the food you put into your body, the healthier it is and the better it is for you. That is the motto that race director and chef Beth Shluger brings to her Hartford Marathon races and her post-race gourmet spreads. After working in the restaurant industry for 12 years, Shluger, a committed runner, left the Kitchen to get into event management. After creating “Taste of Hartford” 25 years ago, Shluger then decided that organizing athletic events might be more fun and the Hartford Marathon Foundation was born. Now, with 21 unique events each year, including running races, triathlons and duathlons, the organization is an event powerhouse in the tri-state area. But what is the HMF most famous for? Its food. Shluger aims for 100 percent organic food at every event and when organic just isn't possible, she goes for locally grown, natural ingredients in the signature dishes, which she makes from scratch for up to 1200 people in her home kitchen.

“We are always trying new things,” says Shluger. “We try to theme the food at every race. The Shamrock duathlon is Irish, so we did Irish burritos with potatoes, scallions, chives and bacon held together with a [light] sour cream mixture. It went with the theme and gave racers carbs, protein and low fat.” Some races get a seasonal, signature dish that works with produce that they get from local farmers. The Red Dress Run for Women gets fresh strawberry shortcake and for the Litchfield Hills Triathlon it's fresh peach cobbler. The United Technologies Greater Hartford Marathon is no exception with homemade apple crisp, vegetarian chili, artesian breads, spinach orzo with roasted vegetables, hot baked potatoes, fresh fruits, yogurt and more. Thanks to the support of Whole Foods Natural Market, the Hartford Marathon event spread is 100 percent organic. “Our fruit and our homemade dishes are organic,” says Shluger, about the rest of the race series for which Dunkin' Donuts is a sponsor (their bagels are not organic).

Shluger's goal is to give her athletes good, seasonal home cooking that is nutritious and satisfying. She is also committed to making planet-friendly changes to how she runs her business with a number of green initiatives, including: working to eliminate plastic water bottles at the finish line, purchasing organic, environmentally friendly products (now they only buy 100 percent recycled paper products “it's an increase in cost,” says Shluger, “but it's worth the effort.”) being part of a Nike's Reuse-A-Shoe program and they are looking into getting hybrid vehicles as lead cars for the events.

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