

Test Your Organic Pet Food Savvy

With the number and variety of organic pet foods on the rise, veterinary health professionals need to know the facts about the good *and* the not-so-good aspects of organic food for animals. Take the following quiz to assess your organic food know-how.

1. Organic food is a passing fad, like pet rocks. True or False?

False. Organic food is here to stay. Annual trends in retail sales reported in a 2000 USDA news release [No. 042500] show that the number of organic farmers is increasing by about 12% each year and that organic farming is “one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. agriculture”. Certified organic cropland more than doubled between 1992 and 1997, and the two organic livestock sectors of egg and dairy production grew even faster. The total market of organic food and beverages in 2001 was \$21 billion, is expected to be \$80 billion by 2008, with a growth rate of 20% per annum.

2. The rules governing labeling and organic certification are the same for both human and pet foods. True or False?

False, and confusing. In 2002, USDA Under-Secretary Bill Hawks sent this notification to the Association of American Feed Control Officials: “The National Organic Standards (7 CFR Part 205) are applicable to pet and companion animal agricultural products.” On April 13, 2004, the National Organic Program (NOP) in Washington issued a Guidance Statement [4/13/2004A] superseding the 2002 statement, indicating that “[N]o standards have yet been developed for aquatic animals or for pet foods.”

3. Organic animal products undeniably taste better than conventional foods. True or False?

False. Claims that organic foods taste different and/or better are controversial and have the potential to generate lawsuits, as there is no evidence of a consistent difference in flavor between organic and conventional products, despite the intrinsic appeal of organic foods.

4. Organic animal products far surpass conventional food in nutritional value. True or False?

False. As with the flavor issue, evidence does not consistently support the assumption that organic animal products are more nutritious. Data are sparse and/or outdated, and studies are often poorly designed. Confounding variables plague those comparisons that do exist regarding differential health outcomes among individuals consuming either organically or conventionally produced foods.

5. Organic animal production is considerably more environmentally friendly than conventional systems. True or False?

True and False. The answer to this depends on the type of the environmental impact being considered. A 2001 assessment by Oosting and DeBoer in the Netherlands showed that emission of green house gases and acidification potential per liter of milk were 14% and 40% lower, respectively, for organic than for conventional dairy herds. A 2003 review article by Imke J.M. de Boer in *Livestock Production Science* explored the environmental impact assessment of conventional versus organic milk production. According to De Boer, "Organic milk production inherently increases methane emission and, therefore, can reduce global warming potential only by reducing emission of carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide considerably. Organic milk production reduces pesticide use, whereas it increases land use per tonne of milk."

6. Animals raised organically are healthier than those raised in conventional operations because they are free of harmful chemicals and drugs. True or False?

True and False. A 2003 review article by Lund and Algiers in *Livestock Production Science* found only 22 peer-reviewed papers on animal health and welfare in organic farming. "None of the published articles found indications that health and welfare are worse in organic than in conventional livestock farming, with the exception of parasite-related diseases. A cautious conclusion based on this material is that except for parasite-related diseases, health and welfare in organic herds are the same as or better than in conventional herds." In the same issue of *Livestock Production Science*, Cabaret explored animal health problems in organic farming. He expressed concern that, because organic farmers must rely on either prevention or alternative healing methods to treat parasitism, some organic farms face excessive veterinary costs without good economic or welfare returns. Furthermore, little data exists about the effectiveness of alternative veterinary medical treatments such as acupuncture, homeopathy, and Ayurvedic medicine for effective sole interventions in farm animals.

7. Organic livestock operations have higher animal welfare standards than conventional operations. True or False?

True, in principle. As stated in the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) guidelines, "Management techniques in animal husbandry should be governed by the physiological and ethological needs of the farm animals in question. This includes: 1) That animals should be allowed to conduct their basic behavioural needs, and 2) That all management techniques, including those where production levels and speed

of growth are concerned, should be directed to the good health and welfare of the animals.”

8. The best diets for dogs and cats contain raw, organic meats, which are closest to what their wild ancestors consumed. True or False?

False. Due to the increased parasite load and the prohibition of irradiation of organic meat, uncooked products may present higher risks of infection to companion animals. However, one benefit of raising livestock without antibiotics may be reduction in the risk of antibiotic-resistant bacteria such as *E coli* 0157:H7.

9. The terms “natural” and “organic” mean the same thing. True or False?

False. “Natural” means that products are minimally processed and contain no artificial ingredients, in accordance with the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. “Organic” refers instead to how producers either grow crops or raise animals, and has, at least for human food, specific criteria and certification parameters.

10. Raising livestock organically largely eliminates the potential for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). True or False?

True. While not completely fool-proof, organic livestock rules require producers to implement numerous proactive management practices. These include a prohibition of feeding mammalian or poultry slaughter by-products to mammals or poultry and improved animal and feed traceability.