

CLARITY GUIDES

*In a world full of disinformation, get **Clarity**.*

LABELS · LOGOS · EVIDENCE · VALUE

Organic

*What the label really means:
the law, the logos, the evidence and where your money
matters most*

◆ **FREE guide · Checked against UK law and official sources**



WELCOME

About this guide

“Organic” is one of the few words on a food label that is protected by law. “Natural”, “farm fresh” and “clean” are not. This free guide explains what the organic label legally guarantees in the UK, what it doesn’t, how to read the codes and logos, what the research really says about health, pesticides and the environment, and how to spend wisely if you want to buy some organic food without blowing the budget.

Every legal rule was checked against GOV.UK, Defra, the Scottish Government and the certification bodies themselves; health and environment claims were checked against peer-reviewed studies. Where the evidence is mixed or weak, we say so plainly. We don’t sell anything and we aren’t linked to any certifier, shop or brand.

How to use this guide

- 1 Chapter 1:** what the word “organic” legally means.
- 2 Chapters 2 and 3:** reading the label, the codes and the logos.
- 3 Chapter 4:** the words that sound like organic but mean little.
- 4 Chapters 5 to 7:** what the evidence says on nutrition, pesticides and the planet.
- 5 Chapters 8 to 10:** myths, Scotland’s organic farms, gene editing and organic.
- 6 Chapter 11:** buying smart on a budget.
- 7 Chapters 12 to 15:** animal welfare rules, how crops are grown, UK vs EU vs US rules, and a timeline.
- 8 Chapters 16 to 20:** a label-decoder worksheet, questions to ask, FAQs, a glossary and a one-page shopping checklist.

IN A WORLD FULL OF DISINFORMATION, GET CLARITY

Every fact and figure in this guide was checked against an official or original source in October 2026, and the sources are listed at the back. Where we could not confirm something, we say so or leave it out. Facts were checked with help from everyday AI tools like Grok, then against the sources listed. If you use these tools yourself, always check what they tell you against an official source.

PLEASE NOTE

This guide is general information, not medical, nutritional or legal advice. It does not recommend any brand, shop or certifier. Rules can change; check GOV.UK or the certifier for the latest position.

WHAT THE ORGANIC LABEL PROMISES

Grown and made to the legal organic rules (chapter 1)

WHAT IT DOESN'T PROMISE

That the food is healthier (chapter 5)

WHAT THE ORGANIC LABEL PROMISES	WHAT IT DOESN'T PROMISE
Inspected at least once a year (chapter 1)	That it is local: check the origin line (chapter 2)
At least 95% of the farmed ingredients are organic (chapter 2)	That it is completely residue-free (chapter 6)
No GM ingredients (chapters 1 and 10)	That it is lower in sugar, fat or salt
A control body code you can look up (chapter 3)	That it tastes better (chapter 8)

How we describe the evidence

WHEN WE SAY	WE MEAN
Strong evidence	Several large, good-quality studies or reviews agree.
Mixed or disputed	Good studies point in different directions, or the answer depends on how you measure it.
Weak or unproven	Little good evidence either way. That doesn't mean a claim is false, only that it hasn't been shown.
Industry report or campaign analysis	Figures from an organisation with a point of view. Useful, but one side of the argument.

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CHAPTER ONE · START HERE

What “organic” legally means

Organic is a set of farming and processing rules written into law, inspected every year and backed by penalties. It's not a vague promise of “healthy” or “natural” food.

A protected word

In the UK you can only call a food “organic”, or use phrases like “organically grown” or “produced using organic methods”, if it meets the organic production rules and the business (and its suppliers) are certified by an approved organic control body. The rule covers brand and company names too: a non-organic product couldn't be sold as “Smith's Organic”. GOV.UK says a business is breaking the law if it uses the word on food, feed or seed that hasn't been inspected and certified.¹

The core rules in plain English

AREA	WHAT ORGANIC RULES REQUIRE (IN SUMMARY)
Pesticides	Synthetic (man-made) pesticides and weedkillers are not allowed, apart from a short permitted list. Some naturally derived products are allowed, such as certain copper and sulphur treatments.
Fertilisers	No synthetic nitrogen fertilisers. Fertility comes from crop rotation, clover and other legumes, manure and compost.
GM and gene editing	Genetically modified organisms, and products made from them, are banned. See chapter 10 for gene editing.
Animals	Free-range access to pasture or outdoors, more space, organic feed, and limits on routine medicines. Antibiotics can be used to treat sick animals, not routinely to prevent disease.
Processing	Only a restricted list of additives and processing aids is allowed. Artificial colours and sweeteners are not on it.
Inspection	Every certified farm and business is inspected at least once a year, and the whole supply chain must be certified.

These rules come from the organic regulations that apply in Great Britain (originally EU law, now “assimilated” UK law) and from the certifiers’ own standards, which can be stricter.^{2,3}

CLARITY TIP

Organic is about **how** food is produced, not about what’s in it nutritionally. Organic crisps, biscuits and sugar are still crisps, biscuits and sugar.

What the evidence says

- **Organic is a growing market.** The Soil Association’s industry report puts UK organic food and drink sales at £3.9 billion in 2025, up 4.2%. The report says that is double the figure of ten years ago, the 14th year of growth in a row.⁴
- **The 95% rule.** A food can only be called organic on the front if at least 95% of its farmed ingredients are organic.¹

02

CHAPTER TWO · THE LABEL

How to read an organic label

Every genuine organic product carries a few small details that prove it. Once you know where to look, you can check any pack in seconds.

The three things to look for

- 1 The word “organic” in the name.** Only allowed if at least 95% of the farmed ingredients are organic.¹
- 2 A control body code.** Products labelled in Great Britain must show a code in the format **GB-ORG-XX**. Products labelled in Northern Ireland use **XI-ORG-XX**. Food certified abroad usually shows a code like **XX-BIO-XXX**.¹

3 A statement of where the ingredients were farmed. Pre-packed organic food produced in Great Britain must say “UK Agriculture”, “Non-UK Agriculture” or “UK or non-UK Agriculture”. A more specific place, such as “Scottish Agriculture”, can be used if 98% of the farmed ingredients come from there.¹

When “organic” only appears in the ingredients

If a product has less than 95% organic ingredients, it can't be called organic on the front. It can only list individual ingredients as organic in the ingredients panel, for example “organic sugar”.¹ That's legal and honest, but it means the product as a whole isn't organic.

WHAT YOU SEE	WHAT IT MEANS
“Organic tomato soup” + GB-ORG code	At least 95% of the farmed ingredients are organic, and the product is certified.
“Tomato soup”; ingredients list says “organic tomatoes (40%)”	Some ingredients are organic; the product overall is not organic.

WHAT YOU SEE	WHAT IT MEANS
“Made with natural ingredients”, no code	Not organic. “Natural” is a different, weaker claim (chapter 4).
Green leaf logo + “EU Agriculture”	Certified to EU organic rules. The EU logo is optional in Great Britain but required on pre-packed organic food from Northern Ireland.
“Organic” on a market stall sign, no paperwork	Ask to see their certificate. Every seller using the word must be certified (very small exemptions aside, check with a certifier).

WATCH OUT

Loose produce in supermarkets and farm shops should still be certified. If in doubt, ask the shop which certifier covers it. A genuine organic seller will know the answer straight away.

03

CHAPTER THREE · THE LOGOS

The certifiers and their logos

In the UK, organic food is checked by independent control bodies approved by the government. Each has its own logo and code.

CODE	APPROVED CONTROL BODY (GREAT BRITAIN)	NOTES
GB-ORG-02	Organic Farmers & Growers (OF&G)	One of the largest UK certifiers.
GB-ORG-04	Organic Food Federation	
GB-ORG-05	Soil Association Certification	The best-known logo in UK shops. Its standards are often stricter than the legal minimum.
GB-ORG-06	Biodynamic Association Certification	Certifies organic and “Demeter” biodynamic food.
GB-ORG-13	Quality Welsh Food Certification	

CODE	APPROVED CONTROL BODY (GREAT BRITAIN)	NOTES
GB- ORG-17	OF&G (Scotland)	Scottish arm of OF&G.

This list comes from the government's register of approved control bodies; check it for the current list, as bodies can join or leave.⁵

Does one logo mean “more organic” than another?

All approved bodies must enforce the legal organic rules. Some, notably the Soil Association, add extra requirements of their own, for example on animal welfare or permitted additives.³ So every genuine logo means “meets the law”; some mean “meets the law plus extra”. The certifier's website will explain its standards.

Biodynamic

Biodynamic farming follows organic rules plus extra practices based on the ideas of Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, including special preparations and a planting calendar linked to the moon and stars. Biodynamic produce

certified by a UK control body is organic. The extra practices haven't been shown to add benefits in scientific trials, so judge them on the organic basics.

04

CHAPTER FOUR · LOOK-ALIKES

Words that sound organic but aren't

Packaging is full of soft, green words. Most of them have no legal definition at all, and none of them mean organic.

WORD ON THE PACK	IS IT LEGALLY DEFINED?	WHAT IT REALLY TELLS YOU
Organic	Yes, by law	Certified production rules, inspected yearly.

WORD ON THE PACK	IS IT LEGALLY DEFINED?	WHAT IT REALLY TELLS YOU
Natural	Only by guidance	The FSA's guidance says "natural" should mean a single traditional food with nothing added and only traditional processing. It says nothing about pesticides or farming.
Pure	Only by guidance	Should mean a single ingredient with nothing added.
Fresh	Only by guidance	Shouldn't be used on food that has been frozen, for example.
Farm fresh, farmhouse, country	No	Marketing words. Must not mislead, but there's no checklist.
Clean, wholesome, real	No	Marketing words with no agreed meaning.
Free range (eggs, poultry)	Yes, separate rules	About outdoor access for hens and chickens, not about pesticides or feed. Organic eggs are always free range; free-range eggs are not always organic.
"Pesticide-free", "chemical-free"	No	Treat with suspicion: everything is made of chemicals, and these claims are rarely independently checked.

The FSA's guidance on “fresh”, “pure” and “natural” isn't law in itself, but general food law says labels must not mislead, and trading standards use the guidance when judging complaints.⁶

CLARITY TIP

If a product leans on words like “natural” and green pictures of fields but has no GB-ORG code, it's not organic. That doesn't make it bad food. It just means you're paying for the marketing, not the certification.

DID YOU KNOW?

In chemistry, “organic” just means a compound containing carbon. Petrol and plastic are “organic” in that sense. On a food label the word has nothing to do with chemistry: it is a legal farming standard.

05

CHAPTER FIVE · MYTHS VS EVIDENCE

Is organic food more nutritious?

This is the question most people ask, and the honest answer is: there are some measurable differences, but nobody has shown they make a real difference to health.

What the big reviews found

A 2012 review of 237 studies at Stanford University found little strong evidence that organic foods are significantly more nutritious than conventional ones, although organic produce was less likely to carry detectable pesticide residues.⁷

A larger 2014 meta-analysis led by Newcastle University, pooling 343 studies, found organic crops had higher levels of antioxidants (on average about 19–69% higher for different

groups of compounds), lower levels of the toxic metal cadmium, and fewer pesticide residues.⁸ A 2016 follow-up found organic milk and meat had around 50% more omega-3 fatty acids, mainly because the animals eat more grass.^{9,10}

So which is right?

Both, in a way. The studies agree that there are some **differences in composition**. What nobody has shown is that those differences lead to people being healthier. Antioxidant levels in a single apple are tiny compared with the effect of simply eating more fruit and vegetables.

WHAT IS A META-ANALYSIS?

It pools the results of many earlier studies to get a bigger, steadier answer than one study can give. Its results are only as good as the studies that go into it, which is why two reviews can reach different conclusions.

What the evidence says

- **Real differences exist:** more antioxidants, less cadmium and fewer pesticide residues in organic crops; more omega-3 in organic milk and meat.^{8,9,10}
- **Health benefits are unproven:** reviews have not found strong evidence that eating organic makes people healthier.⁷
- **The big win is eating your five a day,** organic or not. The NHS recommends at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables daily; fresh, frozen, tinned and dried all count.¹¹
- **Weak claim to watch for:** “organic food has more vitamins”. Vitamin differences in the reviews were small or inconsistent.

06

CHAPTER SIX · MYTHS VS EVIDENCE

Pesticides: what's on your food?

For many shoppers, avoiding pesticide residues is the main reason to buy organic. Here's what the monitoring shows, and what it doesn't.

Residues and legal limits

The UK government tests thousands of food samples a year for pesticide residues. Most conventional samples have either no detectable residues or residues below the legal maximum residue level (MRL). Some exceed the MRL each year, and these are followed up.¹² An MRL is a legal trading limit based on good farming practice, not a safety limit, so going over it doesn't automatically mean a food is unsafe. The government results aren't split into organic and conventional.

Organic food isn't residue-free by definition, because drift and contamination happen, but reviews consistently find residues are much less common on organic crops.⁸

The “cocktail” question

Campaigners such as Pesticide Action Network UK point out that many foods carry residues of several different pesticides at once, and argue that the combined effects of these “cocktails” aren't well studied. Their annual “Dirty Dozen” list ranks foods most likely to carry multiple residues, based on government data.¹³ This is a fair scientific question, but it's a campaign analysis, not proof of harm.

Does eating organic lower cancer risk?

The evidence is mixed. A large French study (NutriNet-Santé, about 69,000 adults) found people who ate the most organic food had about 25% fewer cancers over around four and a half years.¹⁴ But the UK's Million Women Study, following over 600,000 women for about nine years, found no overall reduction in cancer

among those who usually ate organic food.¹⁵

Organic eaters also tend to be wealthier, slimmer and less likely to smoke, which makes it hard to separate the food from the lifestyle.

What the evidence says

- **Fewer residues on organic:** consistently shown.⁸
- **Most conventional residues are within legal limits** in UK monitoring.¹²
- **Cancer: unproven either way.** One large study found lower risk; another, larger UK study did not.^{14,15}
- **Practical step for everyone:** wash fruit and vegetables to remove soil and germs. It may also remove some surface residues, but don't rely on it for that.

07

CHAPTER SEVEN · MYTHS VS EVIDENCE

Is organic better for the planet?

Organic farms usually have more wildlife on them. But they also tend to grow less food per field, and that trade-off is at the heart of the debate.

Wildlife: a clear plus

A major 2014 review of 94 studies found organic farms had, on average, about 34% more species of plants, insects and other wildlife than conventional farms.¹⁶

Yields: a clear minus

Organic yields are lower on average. A 2012 analysis in *Nature* found them around 25% lower overall, though the gap ranged from about 5% to 34% depending on the crop and conditions.¹⁷

Climate: it depends how you count

Per field, organic farming often has lower emissions, because it doesn't use energy-hungry synthetic fertiliser. But a 2019 study modelling a switch to 100% organic farming in England and Wales found that, because of lower yields, more food would need to be imported, and emissions from farming the extra land overseas could make total greenhouse gas emissions **higher**.¹⁸

What the evidence says

- **Better for farm wildlife:** strong evidence.¹⁶
- **Less food per hectare:** strong evidence.¹⁷
- **Overall climate effect:** disputed; depends on yields, diets and land use elsewhere.¹⁸
- **Weak claim to watch for:** “organic is always better for the environment” and “organic is worse for the planet”. Both are too simple.

08

CHAPTER EIGHT · MYTH-BUSTING

Ten organic myths, checked

Organic food attracts strong opinions on both sides. Here are claims you'll see online, with the honest answer.

CLAIM	VERDICT
"Organic means no pesticides at all."	False. A short list of mostly naturally derived pesticides is allowed. ³
"Organic is just a marketing con."	False. It's a legal standard with yearly inspections. ¹
"Organic food is proven to be healthier."	Not proven. Some composition differences, no proven health benefit. ⁷
"Organic food has no residues."	False. It has far fewer, but not always none. ⁸
"Organic animals never get medicine."	False. Sick animals must be treated; routine preventive use is restricted.
"Natural is the same as organic."	False. "Natural" is not certified (chapter 4).

CLAIM	VERDICT
"Organic food is GM-free."	True in how it's produced: GMOs are banned, though tiny accidental traces can't be ruled out. ³
"Imported organic food isn't really organic."	Mostly false. Imports must be certified to recognised standards and carry a code. ¹
"Organic tastes better."	Unproven. Taste depends a lot on freshness and variety.
"You must buy all-organic or there's no point."	False. Many people pick a few items that matter most to them (chapter 11).

CLARITY TIP

One more myth: "organic means local".

False. Organic is about how food is produced, not where. Check the origin line under the code: "UK Agriculture", "Non-UK Agriculture" or "UK or non-UK Agriculture".¹

09

CHAPTER NINE · SCOTLAND

Organic farming in Scotland

Scotland has a large share of the UK's organic land, much of it hill grazing for sheep and cattle.

In 2025 Scotland had 168,200 hectares of organic land (fully organic or converting), up 28% on 2024. That is 3.3% of Scotland's farmland, and nearly half of it is in the Highlands and Islands.¹⁹ Across the UK there were around 540,000 hectares, so Scotland holds roughly 31% of the UK total. Scotland also had 530 registered organic producers and processors in 2025.²⁰

SCOTLAND, 2025	FIGURE
Total organic land (incl. converting)	168,200 hectares (3.3% of farmland)
Fully organic	115,800 hectares
In conversion	52,400 hectares (about double 2024)

SCOTLAND, 2025	FIGURE
Share that is permanent pasture or rough grazing	83% of fully organic land
Share used for cereals	4.3% (4,900 hectares)
Share of cattle, sheep and poultry farmed organically	2–3%

Source for all figures: Scottish Government official statistics.¹⁹

CLARITY TIP

Because so much Scottish organic land is grass, organic lamb, beef and dairy are where Scottish organic is strongest. Look for “Scottish Agriculture” or “UK Agriculture” under the certifier code if you want to buy local.

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CHAPTER TEN · NEW RULES

Gene editing and organic

Since 13 November 2025, England has allowed some gene-edited (“precision-bred”) crops to be authorised for food. Here’s what that means if you buy organic.

The UK’s two largest organic certifiers, the Soil Association and OF&G, both state that gene-edited (“precision-bred”) organisms are not allowed in organic production and must be kept out of organic supply chains. OF&G reports that Defra has confirmed this and that precision-bred organisms are to be treated like GMOs for organic purposes.^{21,22} The EU has taken the same line in its new law on gene-edited plants, Regulation (EU) 2026/1388.^{23,24} England’s rules for precision-bred plants came into force on 13 November 2025.²⁵

The certifiers' worry is that England does not require gene-edited food to be labelled, so keeping it out of organic supply chains relies on paperwork and checks rather than labels.²¹

IN SHORT

If you want to avoid gene-edited food, choosing certified organic is currently the most reliable way to do it. England's rules don't apply in Scotland or Wales, where gene-edited crops are still regulated as GMOs.

II

CHAPTER ELEVEN • PRACTICAL

Buying organic on a budget

Organic usually costs more. If you want some organic food without doubling your bill, here's how to prioritise.

Decide what matters to you

Pesticides

Prioritise produce you eat skin-on that tends to carry more residues, such as soft fruit, apples, pears and leafy greens. Check the latest residue lists.¹³

Animal welfare

Prioritise organic eggs, milk, chicken and pork, where organic rules make the biggest welfare difference.

Wildlife

Any organic buying supports farming with more on-farm wildlife.¹⁶

Budget

Buy organic staples you use a lot (oats, carrots, onions, milk) where the price gap is often small.

CLARITY TIP

Ask everyday AI tools like Grok to help you compare prices or plan a seasonal shopping list, then check prices and certifier codes yourself in the shop.

Ways to pay less

- Compare price per kilo, not per pack.
Supermarket own-brand organic ranges are often the cheapest certified option.
- Buy seasonal and British: organic carrots in autumn cost far less than organic berries in January.
- Frozen organic fruit and vegetables are often cheaper than fresh and waste less.
- Veg box schemes and farmers' markets can be good value; check the seller's certificate.
- Grow your own herbs, salad or potatoes. You don't need certification to garden organically at home.
- Don't pay extra for organic junk food.
Organic biscuits are still biscuits.

I2

CHAPTER TWELVE · ANIMALS

Organic meat, milk, eggs and fish: what the rules say

Many shoppers buy organic for animal welfare. Here are the actual legal minimums in Great Britain, so you can judge for yourself what you are paying for.

The detailed organic livestock rules sit in an assimilated regulation (889/2008) that still applies in Great Britain. Certifiers such as the Soil Association can add stricter rules of their own on top.^{3,26} The figures below are the legal minimums.

Laying hens and chickens

RULE	ORGANIC MINIMUM (GREAT BRITAIN)
Indoor space, laying hens	No more than 6 hens per square metre of usable floor, with 18 cm of perch per bird.

RULE	ORGANIC MINIMUM (GREAT BRITAIN)
Outdoor space, laying hens	At least 4 m ² per hen, with the land used in rotation.
Flock size per house	No more than 3,000 laying hens or 4,800 meat chickens in a single poultry house.
Pop-holes to get outside	At least 4 metres of pop-hole per 100 m ² of house floor.
Age at slaughter (meat chickens)	At least 81 days, unless a slow-growing breed is used. The rule exists to stop intensive, fast-growth rearing.
Beak trimming, tail docking, teeth cutting, dehorning	Not allowed routinely. Can be authorised case by case for safety, health or welfare reasons, with pain kept to a minimum.

All of these figures are set out in the regulation.²⁶

Organic eggs versus free-range eggs

Every egg sold in shops carries a producer code. The first digit tells you the farming system: **0** is organic, **1** free range, **2** barn and **3** cage.²⁷ Free-range rules require outdoor runs with at least 4 m² per hen,²⁸ which is the same

outdoor space as organic. The differences are in everything else: organic hens live in smaller flocks, get organic feed, and have limits on medicines and routine beak trimming.²⁶

FREE RANGE (CODE 1)

Outdoor access, 4 m² per hen. Conventional feed allowed. No organic limits on flock size per house or on routine medicines.

ORGANIC (CODE 0)

Outdoor access, 4 m² per hen, rotated. Organic feed. No more than 3,000 hens per house, 6 per m² indoors. Limits on medicine courses.

Medicines and antibiotics

Organic rules do not ban medicines. Sick animals must be treated, if necessary with antibiotics under a vet. But if an animal has

more than three courses of chemical medicines or antibiotics in 12 months (or more than one course if it lives less than a year), it and its produce can no longer be sold as organic and must go through conversion again. Vaccines and parasite treatments don't count towards the limit. After any treatment, the farmer must wait **twice** the normal legal withdrawal period (or 48 hours if no period is set) before the milk, eggs or meat can be sold as organic.^{26,29}

A DIFFERENCE WITH THE US

The US organic rules are stricter on antibiotics. Under the US-UK organic trade arrangement, UK organic products from animals treated with antibiotics cannot be sold, labelled or represented as organic in the US.³⁰

Organic fish

Organic rules also cover farmed fish. For salmon and trout farmed in the sea, stocking is limited to 10 kg of fish per cubic metre of net pen.²⁶ Wild-caught fish and game are outside the

organic rules (the EU's, and the GB rules based on them), because nobody controls how a wild animal is raised; the same goes for restaurant meals and cosmetics, which the EU organic logo can't be used on.^{2,31}

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN · ON THE FARM

How organic crops are grown and processed

Behind every organic label is a farm that has gone through a conversion period and follows rules on soil, seeds, pests and processing.

Conversion: the wait before “organic”

A farm can't switch overnight. Land must be farmed to organic rules for a conversion period before its crops can be sold as organic: at least **two years** before sowing for annual crops such

as wheat or carrots, and at least **three years** before the first harvest for perennial crops such as apples or soft fruit. Grassland and forage for animals need two years.²⁶ During conversion the farmer bears organic costs but can't charge organic prices, which is one reason organic land grows slowly.

That is why the Scottish figures in chapter 9 separate “fully organic” land from land “in conversion”: in 2025 more than 52,000 hectares of Scottish land were part-way through.¹⁹

The soil comes first

PRACTICE	WHAT THE RULES SAY (SUMMARY)
Soil, not water	Organic crops must be grown in soil. Hydroponic growing (roots in a nutrient solution) is banned in Great Britain. ²⁶
Fertility	Built up through crop rotations, legumes such as clover, and manure and compost. Synthetic nitrogen is not allowed. ²
Pests and weeds	First by prevention: rotations, resistant varieties, natural predators, mechanical weeding. Only if those fail, products from a short approved list. ²⁶

PRACTICE	WHAT THE RULES SAY (SUMMARY)
Seeds	Organic seed should be used where available; GM seed is never allowed. ³
Processing	Only additives and processing aids on an approved list; natural flavourings only; an ingredient can't be in a product in both organic and non-organic form. ^{26,31}

What about greenhouse and imported produce?

Greenhouse crops can be organic if they are grown in soil and follow the same rules.

Imported organic food must be certified by a body recognised for imports, and the label will show its code, such as a XX-BIO-XXX number.¹

Organic food imported into Great Britain from outside the EU, EEA and Switzerland needs a certificate of inspection for each consignment; imports from the EU, EEA and Switzerland don't currently need one.³²

CLARITY TIP

“In conversion” produce is sometimes sold more cheaply. It is grown to organic rules but can’t carry the full organic label yet. If you see it, it’s a way to support farms that are switching.

I4**CHAPTER FOURTEEN · COMPARE**

UK, EU and US organic rules side by side

Most organic food in UK shops is certified to British, EU or US rules. They are similar but not identical, and the differences show up on the label.

	GREAT BRITAIN	EU (AND NORTHERN IRELAND)	UNITED STATES
Main law	Assimilated Regs 834/2007 and 889/2008 ²	Regulation (EU) 2018/848, from 1 Jan 2022 ³³	National Organic Program, 7 CFR Part 205 ³⁴
To be called “organic”	At least 95% of farmed ingredients organic ¹	At least 95% ³¹	At least 95%; “100% organic” if every ingredient is organic ³⁴
Lower tier	Organic ingredients may be named in the ingredients list only	Same	“Made with organic ...” for at least 70%, without the USDA seal ³⁴
Logo	No compulsory national logo; certifier logos common	EU leaf logo compulsory on most pre- packed organic food ³¹	USDA seal optional, for the 95% and 100% tiers ³⁴
Code on pack	GB-ORG-XX ¹	Country code, e.g. XI- ORG-XX in NI ¹	Name of the certifying agent

	GREAT BRITAIN	EU (AND NORTHERN IRELAND)	UNITED STATES
GM and gene editing	Banned; certifiers say precision- bred organisms are excluded ²¹	GM banned; new NGT plants also banned from organic ²³	“Excluded methods”, including genetic engineering, banned ³⁵
Antibiotics in animals	Allowed to treat sick animals, with limits and double withdrawal periods ²⁶	Similar to GB	Treated animals can't be sold as organic ³⁰
Hydroponics	Banned ²⁶	Not compared here	Not compared here

Trade between them

The UK and the EU recognise each other's organic rules as equivalent under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, so British organic food can be sold as organic in the EU and vice versa.³⁶ The US and UK also have an

equivalence arrangement, covering crops, livestock and processed products but not fish or other aquatic animals.³⁰

Northern Ireland is different

Because of the Windsor Framework, Northern Ireland follows the EU organic regulation rather than the GB rules. Pre-packed organic food labelled in Northern Ireland uses an XI-ORG code and must carry the EU organic logo.^{1,33}

What the evidence says

- **What this means in the shop:** an organic product from Germany, Ireland or the US sold in Scotland is certified to rules that are broadly the same as Britain's. The main gap shoppers notice is on antibiotics, where US organic is stricter.
- **A caution:** rules change. The EU and UK both review their organic laws regularly; check GOV.UK for the current GB position.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN • TIMELINE

How the organic rules got here

Organic farming started as a movement and became law. Knowing the history helps explain why the rules look the way they do today.

YEAR	WHAT HAPPENED
1946	The Soil Association is founded in Britain, worried about soil health and intensive farming. ³⁷
1967	The Soil Association publishes its first organic standards. ³⁷
1973	The Soil Association begins certifying organic farms. ³⁷
1991	The first EU-wide organic law, Regulation 2092/91, makes “organic” a legally protected term for crops across the EU, including the UK. ³⁸

YEAR	WHAT HAPPENED
2007– 2009	A new EU organic regulation (834/2007) and its detailed rules (889/2008) replace the 1991 law. The UK sets out offences and enforcement in the Organic Products Regulations 2009. ^{2,39}
1 January 2021	After Brexit, Great Britain keeps the EU organic rules as its own law. The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement recognises each side's organic rules as equivalent. ^{2,36}
1 January 2022	A new EU organic regulation (2018/848) applies in the EU and Northern Ireland. Great Britain stays on the older rules. ³³
13 November 2025	England's precision-breeding rules come into force for plants. Organic certifiers say gene-edited crops stay out of organic. ^{21,25}
26 June 2026	The EU publishes its new law on gene-edited (NGT) plants, which keeps them out of organic farming. ²⁴

The big picture: the core idea (soil health, no synthetic chemicals, high welfare) came from private standards first. Governments then wrote those ideas into law, so that “organic” means the same thing whoever sells it.

WHY GB AND EU RULES ARE DRIFTING APART

Since 2022 the EU has used its newer organic regulation while Great Britain has kept the older one. The two are still recognised as equivalent for trade.³⁶ Over time, small differences in the detailed rules may grow; GOV.UK is the place to check.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN · WORKSHEET

Label decoder: practise on real-style packs

Use these worked examples to test yourself, then use the blank table on your own shopping. Answers are underneath each example.

Worked examples

WHAT THE PACK SAYS	ORGANIC?	WHY
“Organic Porridge Oats”, GB-ORG-05, “UK Agriculture”	Yes	Name, a GB control body code and an origin statement: all three checks pass. ¹
“Oat Bar with organic honey”; no code on the front	No (product)	Only the honey is organic. The bar is below 95% so “organic” can only appear in the ingredients. ¹
“Natural Farm Fresh Eggs”, egg code starts 1	No	Code 1 is free range. Organic eggs start with 0. ²⁷
“Bio Tomaten”, DE-ÖKO-0XX, EU leaf logo	Yes	“Bio” and “Öko” mean organic in German; the code shows an EU control body. UK-EU equivalence covers it. ³⁶
“Organic cotton” T-shirt	Not a food claim	Clothes aren’t food, so the organic food labelling rules in this guide don’t apply; textile claims use separate private standards.

WHAT THE PACK SAYS	ORGANIC?	WHY
"Organic" face cream	Not covered by food law	Cosmetics are outside the organic food rules; any certification is a private scheme. ³¹
"In-conversion carrots", GB-ORG-02	Not yet	Grown to organic rules on land still in its conversion period. ²⁶
Restaurant menu: "organic chicken"	Ask	Catering is outside the EU logo rules. Ask which supplier and certifier. ³¹

Reading a control body code

PART OF THE CODE	EXAMPLE: GB-ORG-05	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
First letters	GB	Where the product was labelled: GB for Great Britain, XI for Northern Ireland; other countries use their own code, and XX-BIO-XXX is used for non-UK certification. ¹
Middle	ORG	Short for organic. ¹
Number	05	Which approved control body certified it. 05 is Soil Association Certification; check other numbers on the GOV.UK list. ⁵

Words like “bio” and “eco” are protected too. In Great Britain, these and other words suggesting organic production can only be used on food that meets the organic rules, so “Bio” on an imported pack means the same as “organic”.⁴⁰

Your own decoder table

Fill this in for five products you buy often. Tick each column that applies. A product needs all of the first three to be fully certified organic.

PRODUCT	“ORGANIC” IN NAME?	CONTROL BODY CODE?	ORIGIN STATEMENT?	NON- ORGANIC PRICE PER KG	ORGANIC PRICE PER KG

CLARITY TIP

Fill in the table over two shops. You'll quickly see where the organic price gap is small (often staples like oats, carrots and milk) and where it's large. Don't recognise a code? Look it up on the GOV.UK list of approved control bodies before you pay the organic price.⁵

I7**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN · ASK**

Questions to ask your supermarket, farmer or veg box

A genuine organic seller will be glad you asked. Here are the questions that get useful answers, and what a good answer sounds like.

At the supermarket

ASK	A GOOD ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE
Which certifier covers your own-brand organic range?	A named control body with a GB-ORG code. ⁵
Is your loose organic produce certified, and how do you keep it separate?	Yes, with separate displays or packaging and staff who know the certifier.
Where is this organic produce farmed?	“UK Agriculture”, “Non-UK” or a named country; for pre-packed food it must be on the label. ¹
Do you have a policy on gene-edited ingredients in non-organic products?	A clear written policy. England doesn’t require gene-edited food to be labelled, so only the shop can tell you. ²¹

At the farm shop, market stall or veg box scheme

ASK	A GOOD ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE
Can I see your organic certificate?	The seller shows or emails a current certificate with a control body name and code.
Is everything on the stall organic, or only some of it?	A clear split. Mixed stalls are fine if labelled honestly.

ASK	A GOOD ANSWER SOUNDS LIKE
Are you organic, or “organic in all but name”?	An honest answer. Uncertified farms can’t legally use the word “organic”. ¹
What’s in season this month?	A seasonal list: in-season food is usually cheaper.
How are your animals kept?	Specifics: outdoor access, flock or herd size, feed.

If you get a poor answer

- Check the code on the gov.uk list of approved control bodies.⁵
- Contact the certifier named on the pack. Certifiers investigate complaints about their licensees.
- In Scotland, report a misleading label to Advice Direct Scotland or Food Standards Scotland; in England, Wales and NI, to trading standards via Citizens Advice (see chapter 20).

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN · FAQs

Your organic questions answered

Short answers to the questions people ask most, with pointers to the chapter that explains more.

IS ORGANIC FOOD PESTICIDE-FREE?

No. A short list of mostly naturally derived products is allowed, and residues are found less often rather than never (chapter 6).^{3,8}

IS ORGANIC FOOD HEALTHIER?

Not proven. There are some measurable differences in composition, but no clear evidence of better health from eating it (chapter 5).⁷

ARE ORGANIC EGGS FREE RANGE?

Yes, and more: organic hens have outdoor access plus smaller flocks, organic feed and medicine limits. Look for egg code 0 (chapter 12).^{26,27}

CAN ORGANIC ANIMALS BE GIVEN ANTIBIOTICS?

Yes, to treat illness under a vet, but with a cap on courses and double withdrawal periods (chapter 12).²⁶

DOES ORGANIC FOOD CONTAIN GM OR GENE-EDITED INGREDIENTS?

They are not allowed in organic production. Tiny accidental traces can't be completely ruled out (chapter 10).²¹

IS IMPORTED ORGANIC FOOD AS GOOD AS BRITISH?

It must be certified to rules recognised as equivalent, and it carries a control body code (chapter 14).³⁶

WHY DOES ORGANIC COST MORE?

Lower yields, more labour, a conversion period with no price premium, and certification costs all play a part (chapters 7 and 13).^{17,26}

CAN A FARM BE ORGANIC WITHOUT BEING CERTIFIED?

It can farm that way, but it can't legally call its food organic (chapter 1).¹

IS "ORGANIC" ON COSMETICS THE SAME AS ON FOOD?

No. Cosmetics are outside the organic food rules (chapter 16).³¹

IS WILD SALMON ORGANIC?

No. Wild-caught fish can't be certified organic; only farmed fish raised to organic rules can (chapter 12).³¹

IS FROZEN ORGANIC FOOD STILL ORGANIC?

Yes, if it's certified and labelled with a code; freezing doesn't change the status.¹

IS SCOTTISH ORGANIC FOOD DIFFERENT?

Same rules across Great Britain. Scotland's organic land is mostly grassland, so organic lamb, beef and dairy are its strengths (chapter 9).¹⁹

DOES ORGANIC FARMING HELP WILDLIFE?

On average, organic farms have more species, about a third more in one large review (chapter 7).¹⁶

IS ORGANIC BETTER FOR THE CLIMATE?

Disputed. Lower yields can mean more land is needed elsewhere (chapter 7).¹⁸

CHECK AN ANSWER YOURSELF

- **Labelling rules:** GOV.UK, Organic food: labelling and advertising rules.¹
- **Who can certify:** GOV.UK list of approved control bodies.⁵
- **Egg codes:** GOV.UK, Eggs: trade regulations.²⁷

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CHAPTER NINETEEN • GLOSSARY

Organic words explained

The jargon you'll meet on packs, certificates and in the news, in plain English.

TERM	MEANING
Assimilated law	EU law that Great Britain kept as its own after Brexit, such as the organic regulations 834/2007 and 889/2008. ²
Biodynamic	Organic farming plus extra practices from the 1920s; certified biodynamic food is also organic (chapter 3).
Control body	An organisation approved by the government to inspect and certify organic businesses, shown by a GB-ORG-XX code. ⁵
Conversion period	The two or three years land must be farmed organically before its produce can be sold as organic. ²⁶
Equivalence	When two countries agree that each other's organic rules are as good as their own, so products can be traded as organic. ³⁶
Excluded methods	US term for techniques banned in organic, including genetic engineering. ³⁵

TERM	MEANING
GMO	Genetically modified organism. Banned in organic production. ²
Hydroponics	Growing plants in water with nutrients, without soil. Not allowed in GB organic. ²⁶
MRL	Maximum residue level: the legal limit for pesticide residues on a food (chapter 6).
NGT	New genomic techniques: the EU's term for gene editing and related methods. ²⁴
Precision-bred	England's legal term for some gene-edited plants authorised under the 2023 Act. ²⁵
Producer code (eggs)	The code stamped on an egg. First digit: 0 organic, 1 free range, 2 barn, 3 cage. ²⁷
Withdrawal period	The time after a medicine before milk, eggs or meat can be sold. Doubled for organic. ²⁶
XX-BIO-XXX	The usual format of a control body code on organic food certified outside the UK, such as DE-ÖKO-001 for Germany. ¹
95% rule	At least 95% of the farmed ingredients must be organic for the product name to say "organic". ¹

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CHAPTER TWENTY · CHECKLIST

Your organic shopping checklist

Tear out or screenshot this page and take it shopping.

- ☐ The word “organic” is in the product name (95%+ organic)
- ☐ A GB-ORG-XX code (or XI-ORG / XX-BIO for NI and imports)
- ☐ An agriculture origin statement (UK / Non-UK / UK or non-UK)
- ☐ Not fooled by “natural”, “farm fresh” or “clean”
- ☐ Organic eggs = free range; free range ≠ organic (egg code 0 = organic)
- ☐ Loose or market produce: ask which certifier
- ☐ Prioritise what matters to you: residues, welfare, wildlife or budget

- ☐ Wash fruit and vegetables, organic or not
- ☐ Five a day matters more than organic

Where to check or report

Organic labelling rules

gov.uk/guidance/organic-food-labelling-rules

Approved control bodies

gov.uk/guidance/organic-food-uk-approved-control-bodies

Misleading label in Scotland

Advice Direct Scotland:
consumeradvice.scot (0808 164 6000), which can refer to your council's trading standards; or Food Standards Scotland:
foodstandards.gov.scot

Misleading label in England, Wales or NI

Your local council trading standards, via Citizens Advice consumer service: citizensadvice.org.uk

**FACT BOX · THE 30-SECOND LABEL
CHECK****1. Is “organic” in the product name?**

That means 95%+ of the farmed ingredients are organic.

2. Is there a control body code? GB-

ORG-XX (Great Britain), XI-ORG-XX (Northern Ireland), or a country code such as DE-ÖKO-0XX or XX-BIO-XXX for imports.

3. Is there an origin statement? “UK Agriculture”, “Non-UK Agriculture” or “UK or non-UK Agriculture”.

All three? It’s certified organic. Missing one? Ask, or check the code on GOV.UK.¹

Organic at a glance: the key numbers

NUMBER	WHAT IT MEANS	CHAPTER
95%	Minimum share of farmed ingredients that must be organic for “organic” in the name. ¹	1, 2
0	First digit of the egg code on organic eggs. ²⁷	12

NUMBER	WHAT IT MEANS	CHAPTER
4 m ²	Minimum outdoor space per hen, organic and free range alike. ^{26,28}	12
3,000	Most laying hens allowed in one organic poultry house. ²⁶	12
2 x	Organic withdrawal period after medicines, compared with the normal legal period. ²⁹	12
2 or 3 years	Conversion period before land's crops can be sold as organic. ²⁶	13
6	Most laying hens allowed per square metre of indoor floor. ²⁶	12
81 days	Minimum age at slaughter for organic chickens, unless a slow-growing breed is used. ²⁶	12
3 courses	Most medicine or antibiotic courses in 12 months before an animal loses organic status (vaccines and parasite treatments excepted). ²⁶	12
10 kg/m ³	Maximum stocking density for organic salmon and trout in sea net pens. ²⁶	12
34%	Average extra species on organic farms in a major 2014 review. ¹⁶	7
£3.9bn	UK organic food and drink sales in 2025 (industry report). ⁴	1

NUMBER	WHAT IT MEANS	CHAPTER
168,200 ha	Organic land in Scotland in 2025, including land in conversion. ¹⁹	9
1946	The Soil Association is founded; organic standards and then law follow. ³⁷	15

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Claims we checked

CLAIM	STATUS
Organic certification bans gene editing / precision-bred organisms	Supported by Soil Association and OF&G statements; OF&G reports Defra confirmation. We did not find a stand-alone Defra page saying this, so it rests on the certifiers' reports of Defra's position. ^{21,22}
Organic food is more nutritious	Weak. Composition differences, no proven health benefit.
Organic lowers cancer risk	Weak / mixed. Observational studies disagree.
Organic is better for the climate	Disputed. Depends on yields and land use.

CLAIM	STATUS
“Dirty Dozen” residue rankings	Campaign analysis of government data, not peer-reviewed.
UK organic sales £3.9bn	Industry report (Soil Association), not official statistics.
“Organic hens get more outdoor space than free range”	False as stated. Both require at least 4 m ² per hen outdoors; organic differs on flock size, indoor space, feed and medicines (chapter 12). ^{26,28}
“Organic costs X% more”	Not given. We found no official, dated UK comparison of organic and non-organic shop prices, so this guide doesn’t quote a price gap or a cost table. Compare price per kilo yourself (chapter 16 worksheet).
Soil Association history dates (1946, 1967, 1973)	Organisation’s own account; consistent with other histories but not independently checked. ³⁷
“US organic is stricter than UK organic”	Partly true. Stricter on antibiotics; similar 95% threshold and GM ban (chapter 14). ³⁰

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ORGANIC ON FOREIGN PACKS

Words you may see on imported organic food:

LANGUAGE	WORD FOR ORGANIC
German	bio, öko, biologisch, ökologisch
French	biologique, bio
Italian	biologico
Spanish	ecológico, biológico
Dutch	biologisch
Danish / Swedish	økologisk / ekologisk
Polish	ekologiczny

These are protected organic terms under the EU organic regulation (2018/848), so on a pack from an EU country they mean the same as “organic”. Whatever the language, imported organic food sold in Great Britain should also carry a control body code: look for it before you pay the organic price.

A CLARITY GUIDE

Organic: What the Label Really Means

Making the confusing clear.

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