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Organic Payoff

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**Organic foods
tend to have more
disease-preventing
phytochemicals.**

**Organic farming is
more eco-friendly.**

Organic Payoff

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Organic products continue to increase in popularity. About \$30 billion is spent annually in the United States for organic foods, with organic fruits and vegetables accounting for 12 percent of all produce sales.

People say they choose organic foods for one of three reasons. They believe they are healthier and more nutritious. Secondly, they say organic foods are virtually free of pesticide contamination and have less health risks. And, lastly, organic farming is viewed as being kinder to the environment, more eco-friendly and has a smaller carbon footprint.



Do organic foods have higher levels of nutrients? In about one-half of the studies, organic fruits and vegetables show slightly higher levels of nutrients, typically about ten percent higher. In addition, fresh produce has considerably higher levels of polyphenols and other antioxidants. These phytochemicals help to defend the plant against attack from microorganisms and, hence, delay spoilage. These compounds also provide good protection against chronic diseases.

In terms of health advantages, organic foods do expose consumers to fewer pesticides associated with human disease. However, no human study has yet demonstrated disease protection as a result of consuming an organic diet. Some of the fruits and vegetables that are typically contaminated with pesticides include apples, celery, strawberries, blueberries, grapes, cucumbers, sweet bell peppers, imported peaches and nectarines, spinach, lettuce and potatoes. They form what some environmental groups call the “dirty dozen.” Other produce with the lowest level of pesticides and, hence, less important to buy organic includes onions, cabbage, sweet peas, asparagus, sweet corn, mushrooms, avocados and sweet potatoes.

A major change of the past decade has been the large volume of produce imported during the winter months and early spring from Central and South America. This imported produce originates from countries that use more sprays than the U.S. Among those who are most likely to be affected by pesticide residues in food are young, growing children, pregnant women and elderly adults with chronic health conditions. Children especially are impacted, and have a higher risk of neurological and developmental problems.

Organic farming does not require large, intensive energy inputs that are required for the production of nitrogen-based fertilizers and pesticides. Synthetic nitrogen fertilizers help boost crop yields, but they also leach nitrates into groundwater and rivers and contaminate our drinking water.

Fruits and vegetables labeled “organic” means that the produce has been grown without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers; they have not been irradiated, and they have not been grown from genetically-engineered seeds. For dairy products to be labeled organic, at least 30 percent of the cow’s diet must have come from pasture grazing, no bovine growth hormone has been utilized to stimulate milk production, and no antibiotics or other drugs have been used.

While costing more, organic foods do have health and ecological advantages. In addition, farms producing organic fruits, tomatoes and legumes can produce as much per acre as conventional farms.

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