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Organic Food: Is It Worth It?

By Winston J. Craig

With the increasing concern about environmental issues, some have turned to buying organic. Many people choose organic foods because they want to protect their families from chemicals such as synthetic pesticides, hormones and antibiotics, and help lessen the burden of pollution of planet Earth.

The organic food industry is now growing about 5 percent a year.

But questions remain. Can organic food production be sufficient to feed large populations? How can you guarantee a food is really organic? And what makes a food organic anyway? Is the 20 to 30 percent higher price for organic food really worth it? Are organic foods any healthier?

For fruits and vegetables to be labeled organic, they must be grown without synthetic pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or sewage sludge, and they must not have been irradiated or genetically engineered. Organic milk comes from animals that, for the past 12 months, were fed 100 percent organic feed and were not given antibiotics or growth hormones. For packaged food, the “Organic” label means at least 95 percent of the ingredients are organic. The label, “Made with Organic Ingredients” means that at least 70 percent of the ingredients are organic.

Those people who experience occupational exposure to pesticides and herbicides, such as farmers and migrant workers, face the greatest risk to their health. Human studies have found that pesticide use is associated with an increased risk of leukemia and liver cancer, birth defects, adverse pregnancy outcomes and Parkinson’s disease.

Nevertheless, there is little data that pinpoints the risk to consumers from eating vegetables and fruits contaminated with any particular pesticide residue. The pesticides now used in farming are metabolized quickly by the body, and it’s hard to find traces of the chemicals. In addition, it’s hard to detect any damage from a particular pesticide when we are exposed to tiny amounts of so many chemicals.

The produce found to be most contaminated with pesticides includes peaches, apples, bell peppers, strawberries and cherries, while the least contaminated includes onions, sweet corn, peas, bananas, cabbage and broccoli. About 15 percent of the vegetables and 35 percent of the fruit consumed by Americans last year was imported, mostly from Latin America and Asia. Imported produce contains, on average, about three times the pesticide residue level found on domestically produced food.

Are organic fruits and vegetables more nutritious? There is no evidence that organic foods are more nutritious or taste better than conventionally grown foods.

In summary, pesticides are potent chemicals, and we should minimize our intake of them whenever possible. Fruits and vegetables contaminated with pesticides should be thoroughly washed before eating. Choosing organic produce, whenever it is available at a reasonable price, is a healthy alternative. Regularly eating red meat and being overweight pose greater risks to your health than consuming foods that have been exposed to pesticides.

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