Clear—despite critics

Biological Farmers of Australia Press Release, 20 March 2006

Scientific research confirms the common belief that organic food is healthier than regular products, despite repeated claims that there's no difference, say organic experts.

Shoppers who buy the more expensive organic food do so for many reasons, including a belief that it's better for you, wanting to avoid pesticides and wanting to be kinder to animals and the environment. Yet many official food bodies claim that there's no evidence to support the view that organic food is better for you.

"In fact," says Shane Heaton, nutritionist and author of Organic Farming, Food Quality and Human Health, "there's a mountain of evidence, if you care to take a look." The scientific evidence shows that organic food is, on average, more nutritious than non-organic food. Because artificial fertilisation produces lush growth and swells non-organic plants with more water, in organic food there is more 'dry matter' (that is, food) weight-for-weight. Partly because of this and for other reasons too, there are higher levels of minerals and vitamin C in organic produce.

Research by American nutritionist, Virginia Worthington, has confirmed that, based on current dietary patterns, the differences can be enough to help you achieve the recommended daily allowances for certain nutrients that you otherwise may not achieve.

Research has also shown that organic produce contains higher levels of antioxidants than conventional produce. Heaton is an internationally recognised expert on organic food and laments that many of his colleagues in nutrition refuse to advocate organics (even though they eat it themselves), because of a mistaken belief that its higher price may lead to reduced fruit and vegetable consumption.

"But it's a false assumption," says Heaton. "The typical Australian household spends far more on junk food than on fruit and veges, more on alcohol than on fruit and veges, more on take-aways than on fruit and veges, and five times more on recreation than on fruit and veges. It's all a matter of priority and it's simply not true that people can't afford organic food.

"Many consumers actually find it easier to eat more fruit and veges when they go organic, and are understandably delighted when their kids start liking fruit and veges for the first time."

A recent claim in the Australian media was that, "A consumer would have to eat truckloads of non-organic food to accumulate any meaningful amount of pesticides or chemicals in their body." The problem is," asserts Heaton, "that we do. In our lifetimes we take in around 100 tonnes of food and drink, and there's ample evidence that many chemicals from our diet do accumulate in our bodies.

Research shows that around one in three of all fruit and vegetable items on sale in Australia carries residues of one or more pesticides. Far lower levels of pesticide residues are found in and on organic produce. While regulators assert that rigorous safety assessments have confirmed that pesticide residues are no threat to human health, consumers intuitively know that this is a false assurance. No rigorous safety assessment has or can be made of the infinite number of mixtures that we are exposed to. The effect of increased toxicity due to combinations is called synergism.

Many pesticides work by interfering with the nervous system of insects, a mechanism that can also affect the nervous system of humans. Other reported health effects of individual pesticides vary. Some cause harm to bodily development or the reproductive system, and some are known or suspected hormone disruptors.

Israeli researchers have linked symptoms such as headaches, tremor, lack of energy, depression, anxiety, poor memory, dermatitis, convulsions, nausea, indigestion and diarrhoea with dietary intakes of pesticides. Belgian research has found that women diagnosed with breast cancer are six to nine times more likely to have the pesticides DDT or hexachlorobenzene in their bloodstream compared to women who did not have breast cancer.

Hawaiian researchers following 8,000 people for 34 years have found that increasing consumption of fruit and juice, and the pesticide residues they carry, significantly raised the risk of Parkinson's disease. According to the World Health Organisation, "Harmful pesticide residues can contaminate the environment and accumulate in ecosystems, thus entering the human food chain. Some older pesticides were designed to be persistent and are thus found worldwide in water and soil. Newer pesticides degrade more quickly, but are often more acutely toxic. Some of these pesticides may cause cancer or damage the nervous,
reproductive or immune systems after short-term, high-level exposures. Because children's bodies are still developing, foetuses, infants and children can be more vulnerable to toxic compounds than adults, and their diets and special behaviour patterns often result in greater exposure to pesticides. Pesticide-specific data on prenatal and postnatal developmental toxicity and exposure are lacking for many currently used pesticides.¹⁸

Children's immature and developing organs, brains, detoxification systems and immune systems, plus their greater intake of food per kilo of body weight combine to make them much more susceptible to toxins than adults. Research has shown repeatedly that organic food significantly lowers children's dietary exposure to pesticides, having the effect of lowering their exposure from above recognised safety levels to below these levels.¹⁸

A recent study showed how a combination of environmental, household and dietary exposure has caused developmental deficits in children in Mexico.¹⁰ Similar routes of exposure are common in Australia via council pest-control programs, household and garden insecticides and agricultural residues in food.

Food additives are strictly limited in organic food processing, and are allowed only when they are essential to the production of the food. Specific additives implicated in various health problems, such as hydrogenated fats and heart disease, phosphoric acid and osteoporosis, MSG and asthma, aspartame and migraines, are prohibited.

Various bodies, including the World Health Organisation, have called for a reduction in the amount of antibiotics used in agriculture due to the risks to human health from the development of antibiotic resistance. Antibiotics are used extensively in conventional animal farming to promote growth and prevent disease, but in the production of organic animal products, Australian standards prohibit their use. Organic farmers rely instead on better animal welfare and preventive health management.

Genetic modification is prohibited in organic food and farming as there is considerable uncertainty over the long-term safety of consuming GM foods. They have not been tested sufficiently and some trials have revealed unexpected toxicities.

"I don't consider organic food a luxury item," says Heaton, "but rather it's how food is supposed to be, and the higher price is the real price of real food — paid now, not later in the form of environmental and health-care costs. More and more consumers are realising that they can buy either good food or cheap food, but not good cheap food."

"It is my firm belief that once people become more aware of the issues surrounding food production, they will make more conscious choices of the food they feed themselves and their families."

Who knows? Perhaps, if spending on organic fruits and vegetables increases, people will spend less on junk food, take-aways, alcohol and cigarettes. Perhaps they'll need to spend less on medical expenses. This is the vision of the organic movement in Australia.

The health of the nation depends vitally on the health of our agriculture, and the intensive, agrichemical-based conventional system is taking us in the wrong direction.

For consumers who want to know what is and what is not in their food, organic standards give them a very clear statement.

"In my opinion," concludes Heaton, "organic food offers those interested in protecting, maintaining or improving their health an important safe haven in today's polluted and processed world."

"Organic food is not a luxury. It is how food is supposed to be."
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Benefits of Organic Foods references continued from page 37


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