



Eating Organic: Are the Benefits Real?

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

Once found only in health food stores and farmers' markets, organic food is going mainstream. Today, around the world, approximately 75 million acres (31 million hectares) are being grown organically, according to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). In the United States alone, nearly three-quarters of Americans report that they've tried organic food and drinks and about a quarter consume these products regularly.

Whether you want hormone-free beef or pesticide-free carrots, you don't have to look far or even go out of your way, as more and more grocery store chains and even warehouse and club stores have begun stocking their shelves with organic options.

What's the draw? While there remains some debate about whether the pesticides and hormones used in producing conventional food products have adverse health effects, those who regularly opt for organic foods believe these products offer better quality and are better for their health and the environment.

To earn the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) "organic" label, products must adhere to a stringent set of national standards that were put in place in 2002. Meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products must come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Foods must be pro-

duced without most conventional pesticides, fertilizer made with synthetic ingredients or sewer sludge, bioengineering or ionizing radiation. USDA officials inspect organic farm operations to make sure farmers adhere to these requirements, and even those who handle and transport organic food from farm to market must be certified.

While organic farming is inarguably good for the environment (generating no pesticides or other agents to "run off" into groundwater, among other things), organic production and distribution is also more costly than conventional farming. Not surprisingly, these costs get passed along to the consumer—organic fruits, vegetables, milk and meat can run up to 40 percent more than conventional products, says Jovan Ruzicic of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit research organization.

USDA officials don't predict an appreciable cost adjustment anytime soon. "As long as demand increases faster than supply and prices of conventionally produced food remain constant, organic food will continue to sell for higher prices," the government agency reports in its newsletter, *Amber Waves*.

The good news, says the EWG's Ruzicic: If you can't always buy organic, you can dramatically lower your exposure to chemical pesticides by being selective about where you put your organic food dollars. The EWG recently published a list

of the “Dirty Dozen”—the 12 most contaminated fruits and vegetables, as well as the 12 most “Consistently Clean” items. “If people follow the lists as we suggest, they can reduce up to 90 percent of their pesticide intake from produce,” Ruzicic says.

Topping the Dirty Dozen list were peaches (almost 97 percent tested positive for pesticides and almost 87 percent had two or more pesticide residues) and apples (92 percent and 79 percent). The remaining offenders: sweet bell peppers, celery, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, pears, imported grapes, spinach, lettuce and potatoes.

Heading the Consistently Clean list: Onions, avocados and sweet corn (more than 90 percent of the samples of these vegetables showed no detectable pesticide residues, according to the EWG). Others: pineapples, mangoes, asparagus, sweet peas, kiwi, bananas, cabbage, broccoli and papaya. People eating all the conventionally grown products from this list would be exposed to fewer than two pesticides a day, according to the EWG. By contrast, those eating from the Dirty Dozen will be exposed to about 15 pesticides a day. (To help shoppers keep these lists handy, the EWG has produced a wallet-sized card that can be downloaded for free at www.foodnews.org.)

“Because the toxic effects of pesticides are worrisome, not well understood, or in some cases completely unstudied,” notes the EWG, “shoppers are wise to minimize exposure to pesticides whenever possible.”

FACTS

- The global market for organic products was estimated to be at more than 30 billion Euros (\$49 billion U.S.) in 2006. The vast majority of organic products are consumed in North America and Europe.
SOURCE: International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements

- Australia leads the world in certified organic surface area, with 11.8 million hectares in 2006. Argentina ranks second (3.1 million hectares/7.6 million acres), China third (2.3 million hectares/5.6 million acres) and the United States fourth (1.6 million hectares/3.9 million acres).
SOURCE: The World of Organic Agriculture—Statistics and Emerging Trends 2006

- In 2003, fruits and vegetables accounted for 42 percent of the \$10 billion in total organic food sales. Total U.S. sales of organic products are expected to reach \$17.8 billion in 2007.
SOURCE: National Business Journal

- The United States has led the way in adding new organic land, according to the IFOAM, with 400,000 hectares (988,000 acres) coming on line in 2006. Italy (110,000 hectares/271,000 acres) and Poland (85,000 hectares/210,000 acres) also posted noteworthy growth.
SOURCE: International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements

- Don't be fooled: While many food products bear labels proclaiming them “all natural,” the term is not interchangeable with “organic”—a designation defined and regulated by the U.S. government.

- Between 1997 and 2003, the number of certified organic livestock animals increased fivefold, reports the USDA in *Amber Waves*, adding that dairy “has been one of the fastest growing segments of the organic food industry.”

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