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Does It Pay To Buy Organic?

For pregnant women and children, the benefits are worth the higher price

Kim Dennis -- with her 2-, 4-, and 6-year-olds in tow -- looked over the fruit at a Whole Foods Market in Atlanta. She picked up a pint of organic blueberries selling for \$5.99. Nearby, conventionally grown ones went for \$4.99. She put the organic berries in her basket. "I think it's definitely worth paying more," she says. "If they sit there and eat a whole pint of berries, that's a lot of pesticides for their little bodies." With shoppers like Dennis willing to plunk down 10%, 20%, sometimes even 100% more, organic food sales hit \$10 billion in 2003, up from \$178 million in 1980. Responding to the growing demand, mainstream grocers are stocking more organic produce, milk, baby food, and meats, while healthy-food chains such as Whole Foods have opened dozens of stores in the past five years. Food certified under U.S. Dept. of Agriculture regulations as organic must be produced without most synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Antibiotics, growth hormones, and feed made from animal parts are also banned.

Is organic worth the extra money? Research has yet to prove an adverse health effect from consuming the low levels of pesticides commonly found in U.S. food. But for the most vulnerable groups -- children and pregnant women -- going organic whenever possible for fruits and vegetables that carry the heaviest pesticide load makes sense. For organic meat, poultry, eggs, and milk, the direct health benefit is less clear. It might come down to your willingness to pay more to avoid supporting certain agricultural practices, such as antibiotic use in animals, which could promote resistant bacterial strains, or the use of growth hormones, which could prematurely wear down the animal.

Even organic advocates say certain fruits and vegetables are probably not worth the premium. For example, at the Atlanta Whole Foods, organic bananas cost 78 cents a pound, 30 cents more than regular bananas. But there's almost no health benefit to buying organic in this case, according to Charles Benbrook, technical director of the nonprofit Organic Center for Education & Promotion, founded with the support of the industry's Organic Trade Assn. Any pesticide residue is probably discarded along with the peel.

REPEAT OFFENDERS

Other produce contains several times the amount of pesticides as the organic equivalents, and the residue can't be peeled or washed away. Some 98% of the peaches tested by the USDA in 2002 showed evidence of at least one pesticide (www.ams.usda.gov/science/pdp). Other repeat offenders over the years include apples, strawberries, and pears -- fruits children gobble as finger food.

That's worrisome given that contaminants pose the biggest risk to children and fetuses. Pesticides have been shown to cross the placenta during pregnancy, and a recent study by scientists at the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health in New York found a link between pesticide use in New York apartments and impaired fetal growth. Another study, from the University of Washington in Seattle, found that preschoolers fed conventional diets had six times the level of certain pesticides in their urine as those who ate organic foods. And a 2003 report from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention detected twice the level of some pesticides in the urine of children as in that of adults.

Few doubt that high doses of pesticides can cause neurological or reproductive damage. With infant reproductive organs still forming and the brain developing through age 12, and with young livers and immune systems less able to rid bodies of contaminants, eating organic is more important for children and pregnant or breast-feeding women.

But even then, the argument for some foods is less compelling. While 47% of the produce sampled by the USDA in 2002 had detectable pesticide residues, only 16% of grains and 15% of meat tested did. Most of the residues found in meat (almost always in the fat) were from long-banned chemicals like DDT, which remain in the environment and is not a problem organic farming methods can solve.

Widespread use of antibiotics and growth hormones is a larger issue for those considering organic meat, poultry, eggs, and milk. Here, the major health benefit to consumers is indirect. Antibiotic use in animals helps promote antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria, explains Urvashi Rangan, director of eco-labels.org, a site developed by Consumers Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports*. And while the U.S. Food & Drug Administration says the growth hormone used in cattle is virtually identical to what cows naturally produce, consumer groups such as Consumers Union argue that milk from treated cows has higher levels of a growth factor linked to increased cancer risk.

With meat, a more recent concern is bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease. The disease spreads when cows ingest animal feed made with parts from dead animals. The human form of the illness, Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease, is believed to be caused by eating contaminated beef. It is always fatal. The risk of contracting the disease, however, is low. The U.S. has had only one confirmed case of mad cow disease, and the only American case of CJD involved a woman who contracted it in Great Britain.

Whether to shell out more for organic beef will depend on your budget -- and how

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seriously you take the threat of mad cow disease. Other ways to lower the odds include avoiding processed meats such as hot dogs and preground hamburger that might contain bits of brain or spinal cord and eschewing cuts sold with the bone, says Michael Hansen, a senior research associate at Consumers Union.

The next product in line for organic certification is fish. The USDA is studying what such certification would involve.

Remember that despite all the things you could worry about, America's food supply is among the safest in the world. And organic or not, it's still important for your children to eat their vegetables.

By Carol Marie Cropper

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