

Stanford Organic food study "missed the point"

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PAN Blog

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This week's controversy surrounding a Stanford study claiming to have established that organic food is no more nutritious than non-organic illustrates the pitfalls of talking about food issues in a consumer frame. And people all around the country are saying so.

Food issues are never solely or even mainly about individual consumer choice — our food and farming system connects us with each other and is by most measures our most impactful daily interaction with the environment.

Food is, for instance, the largest single-sector contributor to climate change, and industrial agriculture consumes 70% of the earth's freshwater supplies. Food is at the center of human culture, and always has been. More to the point, food is unavoidably political and we are increasingly understanding ourselves as food citizens much more than consumers.

Accordingly, from the Los Angeles Times to the Des Moines Register people are responding to the Stanford study with some variation of "so what?" or "you've missed the point."

The point is...

People choose and afford organic when they can for a variety of reasons, a good many of them having to do with not wanting pesticides to be used on their food or in their name.

Pesticide residues on food in unknown combinations can have real health impacts — especially at critical life junctures like pregnancy, early childhood or when we are older, or sick. Pesticides are driving biodiversity loss and play a key role in the decline of pollinators.

Pesticide use in the fields puts farmers, and especially farmworkers and their families on the frontlines in ways that are profoundly unjust. Farmworkers face so many risks and get so much sicker than just about any other workforce, that they are largely exempt from our nation's labor laws.

Pesticide use on food is, in other words, about so much more than the consumer benefits of organic. Yet media insistently seek to frame organic as a consumer issue (and as the folks at the Framework Institute note, we in the food advocate world too often play into this). As a result, we get a distracting and ideologically charged "debate" that misses the mark every time.

What the data really say

For the academic at heart (myself included), Dr. Chuck Benbrook of the Organic Center wrote a full technical review of the Stanford study, noting a variety of methodological flaws like undercounting and the failure to meaningfully define terms. Key among the flaws is a misleading math trick which allows the study to depict the increased risk of exposure to pesticide residues on food at around 30%. In fact, the data show "an overall 81% lower risk or incidence of one or more pesticide residues in the organic samples compared to the conventional samples."

Taking the study on in its own terms (i.e. the individual consumer benefits of organic), Benbrook's corrections boil down to this:

From my read of the same literature, the most significant, proven benefits of organic food and farming are:

1. a reduction in chemical-driven, epigenetic changes during fetal and childhood development, especially from pre-natal exposures to endocrine disrupting pesticides;
2. the markedly more healthy balance of omega-6 and -3 fatty acids in organic dairy products and meat; and
3. the virtual elimination of agriculture's significant and ongoing contribution to the pool of antibiotic-resistant bacteria currently posing increasing threats to the treatment of human infectious disease.

So, fewer sick kids, better good fats and a better shot at having antibiotics that actually work. And so much more.

Learn More» To get into the nitty-gritty of comparing organic and conventional foods in terms of which residue combinations are found on which foods in what amounts, see our WhatsOnMyFood.org database, website and iPhone app.

RobinOC wrote:

You can bet there is money behind this report. Who donates to Stanford? I would seriously question the science as well as the motives of this study. The first thing cancer patients need to do is to detox themselves, and this includes avoiding any and all pesticides. Pesticides also can act as endocrine disrupters which probably contributes to the rising rates of cancer in this country. There is much more at stake here than simple chemical nutrition anyway.

donlouis wrote:

My local paper for Santa Cruz, CA, the Sentinel, carried the Stanford study article. I replied with this too brief letter.

Not surprisingly, organic and conventionally grown fruits and vegetables are equally nutritious. But are they are equally safe? Consider facts about pesticide residues.

Many pesticides are known to damage health. Residues on five popular fruits can contain 10 carcinogens, 30 hormone disruptors, 15 neurotoxins, and 10 reproductive toxins. Are the amounts of residues on conventional produce really "within safety limits"? EPA's original "safe dose" for the herbicide Atrazine in drinking water was 3 ppb; it was later dropped to 0.1 ppb; EPA's original "safe dose" for the insecticide Methoxychlor was 5 mg/kg/day; it was later lowered to 0.02 mg/kg/day. It should not be surprising that ingesting 62 pesticides on peaches is likely to be harmful, even if each pesticide by itself is not. Scientists have demonstrated the power of multiple pesticides.

For more information see the author's book, "How to be Healthy in a Toxic World," from Amazon.

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