

Organic fruit and veggies: health or hype?

✖ *Two Peds in a Pod turns today to guest blogger Dr. Alan Woolf, Director of the Pediatric Environmental Health Center at Children's Hospital Boston and president-elect of the American Academy of Clinical Toxicology, to tackle the question, "Should you feed your kids organic fruits and vegetables?"*

Nutritionists are urging parents to feed kids one and one-half cups of fruit and two and one-half cups of vegetables daily and the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests whole fruit rather than juice to meet most of the daily fruit requirements.

OK, so that's fine, but why spend a lot more money to buy those fruits and veggies labeled organic? Are they worth it? Will non-organic produce harm your kid? No easy answers here. American consumers demand a bountiful supply of blemish-free, perfect fruits and vegetables. We want unspotted shiny red apples, brightly colored large oranges and arrow-straight asparagus. Farmers want to give us just that. Since pests attack crops causing blemishes, worms, blight, and other forms of costly crop damage, farmers have been using pesticides for years to increase crop yield, profit, and visual marketability.

The US Dept of Agriculture (USDA) regulates the agricultural procedures and labeling that use the buzz word organic. Obviously every business wants to put that word on their product if it means consumers will run out and buy it. The USDA will certify farms that use organic methods. But even the USDA's definition of organic allows a percentage of synthetic chemicals to be added to products labeled organic. Also

organic does not mean that the food contains increased amounts of essential minerals and vitamins or is more nutritious for you. And remember that organic produce doesn't necessarily come from small, cuddly, local, family-run farms. Most large, international agribusinesses are touting organic foods for sale these days.

Well over one billion pounds of pesticides, according to the Department of Agriculture, are used on American crops annually. And pesticides tend to be nasty chemicals—otherwise they wouldn't kill bugs. In large amounts, some types can cause seizures or coma in people. However, all foods, whether organic or non-organic, must contain pesticide residues well below the standard that the government considers safe. Not every piece of non organic fruit even contains a residue; it's hit and miss.

But what about the long-term safety of pesticides in trace amounts, the amounts barely present as micro-grams or nano-grams? The fact is that no one knows the safety for sure. The science just isn't there yet. Some dispute the government's definitions; arguing that children don't eat the same market basket as adults (they eat more fruit). They reason that using adult pesticide residue standards may not protect children. Recently some scientists did a study where they measured pesticide residue in the urine of school-aged children who were fed regular, market-basket produce, and then measured again after they switched them to organic-only fruits and vegetables. Guess what—kids fed organic foods excreted less pesticide residues in their urine. There's a powerful argument for organic.

One thing that everyone agrees with—wash all of your fruits and vegetables after you buy them and before anybody in your family eats them. And that means soap and water, not just a quick rinse. Also keep in mind that infants and children are resilient even in this modern age filled with all sorts of

hazards. Kids and adults are armed with marvelous defense mechanisms that prevent chemicals from doing bodily harm. Even if a chemical does cause some injury, the body has remarkable mechanisms that repair the damage in a hurry. No need to be “chemical phobic;” you can’t keep your kids in a bubble.

That being said, you still need to be cautious. In pediatrics we often invoke the “precautionary principle.” The idea is that if you don’t exactly know what a chemical will do to a child’s health because there aren’t enough scientific studies out there, then you assume that what it is capable of is bad and so, if possible, try not to expose them, just as a precaution.

When you can, buy from local farms or stands where you can ask them their growing practices, or else just grow your own. If you decide to buy organic foods, you should eat them right away. They may not stay edible as long without preservatives. Again, no matter what type of food you buy, wash, wash, wash.

Finally, alternative “greener” farming techniques, integrated pest management (IPM), and more resistant varieties of plants have increased crop yields, in many cases without using as much pesticide. That’s good news for all of us. Breeding of genetically-engineered plants require less use of pesticides, but they may not be acceptable to most consumers. That’s a whole column in itself!

The bottom line: My wife and I will try to buy organic foods when we think of it, but we don’t obsess over it when we forget.

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