Organic and Health

Headlines don't necessarily reflect the facts!

- A recent *Reuters* headline proclaimed "No evidence organic foods benefit health: study." That implies there are no health benefits from eating organic foods. In reality, the study authored by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Health researchers looks at the paucity of data now available concerning the nutrition-related health effects of organic foods, and points out the need for better designed studies to answer this question. The review, which appeared in the May 12 online posting of articles for *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, only found 12 studies with any relevance to nutrition-related aspects of organic food, and most of these were poorly designed and flawed.

Mounting evidence proves there are health benefits for consuming organic foods. Studies linking non-organic practices to increased health risks are beginning to prove more conclusively the many benefits that organic agriculture has to offer farmers, the land, our water supplies, air, and ultimately, the health of the planet and those living on it.

- The U.S. President's Cancer Panel report released in early May exhorted consumers to choose food grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers, antibiotics, and growth hormones to help decrease their exposure to environmental chemicals that can increase their risk of contracting cancer (http://deainfo.nci.nih.gov/advisory/pcp/pcp08-09rpt/PCP_Report_08-09_508.pdf).
- A study published May 17 in *Pediatrics* concluded that exposure to organophosphate pesticides—prohibited in organic production—at levels common among U.S. children may contribute to the prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in these children. The article reported findings from a study examining the association between urinary concentrations of metabolites of organophosphates and ADHD in children ages 8 to 15. Using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, researchers led by Maryse Bouchard, a researcher in the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health at the University of Montreal, analyzed the levels of pesticide metabolites in the urine of 1,139 children and found children with above-average levels had roughly twice the odds of being diagnosed with ADHD.

The confounding factor in comparing the nutritional aspects of organic and conventional agriculture has been that few studies have been conducted with the scientific rigor required to show definite differences.

- A French researcher's 2009 review of scientific findings concerning organic products has confirmed the high nutritional quality and safety of food produced using organic practices. The literature review, prepared by Denis Lairon of the University of Aix-Marseille in France, was commissioned by the French Agency for Food Safety (AFSSA) and published in *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* (http://swroc.cfans.umn.edu/organic/ASD_Lairon_2009.pdf). Lairon noted there are nutritional benefits to organic produce, such as more dry matter, minerals and antioxidant micronutrients than their non-organic counterparts. Meanwhile, he wrote, studies show organic foods have significantly lower amounts of nitrates and residues of toxic chemical pesticides, fungicides and herbicides than do non-organic foods.
- Just released prior to Lairon's review, a British article in-press in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* concluded there wasn't much difference in nutrient density between organic and non-organic foods. Also written by the researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Health, this article, however, prompted criticism that it didn't look at all the attributes of organic products and it was unclear whether all of the studies actually looked at products that were truly organic. Even the authors did not rule out the possibility of nutrient differences between organic and conventional food.

Source: The Organic Trade Association, May 2010.