Organic foods provide no health bonus

By ACSH Staff — September 4, 2012

For years now, the organic food industry has staked its business on the idea that organic means healthier. And for just as long, ACSH has been saying that the claim is false: There are no nutritional or safety differences between foods produced according to organic standards and those produced by means of conventional agricultural methods. Now, a study appearing in the current issue of Annals of Internal Medicine provides evidence against the common equation of organic with healthier.

Led by Dr. Crystal Smith-Spangler of Stanford University, the latest investigation consisted of a systematic review of 17 human studies and 223 studies of nutrient and contamination levels in a wide array of foods, including fruits, vegetables, grains, milk, eggs, chicken, pork, and red meat. The results showed only minor differences between organic foods and their conventionally farmed counterparts.

Many people do not realize that organic labeling actually has nothing to do with nutritional value or safety; it was instituted as a marketing device by the USDA, says ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava. It’s refreshing to see a study stand up for scientific truth that is, organic and conventionally grown foods have nearly identical nutritional values.

Overall, the Stanford study found little evidence supporting organic food’s purported superiority to conventionally grown food. And while researchers found that eating organic produce may reduce exposure to pesticides by 30 percent, pesticide levels in both organic and conventional produce were well within the limits set by the FDA. In addition, according to the study, both organic and conventional produce and animal products were at equal risk of being contaminated with potentially dangerous bacteria.

Phosphorus was the only nutrient that was found in higher amounts in organic produce. However, since phosphorus deficiency in humans is extremely rare, the study notes that these findings have little clinical significance. Weak evidence also suggested higher levels of phenols in organic produce, as well as more omega-3 fatty acids in organic milk and chicken.

When it comes to nutrition and food safety, conventional food is on par with organic. But as Dr. Spangler notes, Consumers may choose to purchase organic foods for other reasons besides nutrition and food safety, such as concern for animal welfare, the environment, or preferences in taste.
ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan agrees. The topic of organic foods is an emotionally-charged issue, she states. While there is no scientific evidence that organic is better than conventional, many people make these choices based on ideological or political beliefs and marketing as opposed to nutritional concerns.

For more information on organic food nutrition, we recommend the following commentary [2] by ACSH scientific advisor Dr. Joseph Rosen, professor of food and toxicology at Rutgers University.

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