

Health Group Calls Pesticide Report "Misleading and Designed to Scare"

By ACSH Staff — January 30, 1998

New York, NY January 30, 1998. In a new report on pesticide residues on America's fruits and vegetables, the Environmental Working Group (EWG) has twisted data and misinterpreted basic scientific information in a way calculated to provoke fear among America's parents. This was the conclusion of the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), a consortium of over 250 leading scientists and physicians.

A look at this latest EWG report makes clear why consumers should view that organization and its reports with skepticism. The EWG an environmental group, not a health group has put its scientifically unwarranted wish for a pesticide-free environment above the very real public-health goal of increasing America's consumption of fresh fruit.

The EWG has released a "study" that purports to find levels of pesticide residues on produce and especially on some fruits favored by young children that exceed federal safe-limits standards. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

The EWG report alleges that around one million American children aged five years or younger are exposed to levels of organophosphate insecticides that exceed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s safety standards. But the level cited by the EWG is the EPA's so-called reference dose (RfD). The RfD is not the maximum safe dose, for children or anyone else. It is, in fact, a level 100 times lower than the highest dose of a chemical that would not have an observable effect in animal testing. What this means is that there is a large protection margin built into the FDA's estimates of RfDs. The finding that an RfD is exceeded in a food sample is merely a signal to regulators to investigate why this occurred, not a cause for great concern much less panic among parents.

And speaking of samples: Nearly half the data the EWG used in their analysis were taken from an FDA study designed to maximize the detection of illegal pesticide residues. In other words, that portion of the EWG's data did not come from random samples, so it cannot be considered to represent the typical pattern of pesticides found on American produce.

Thus, by its use of improper data and its misuse of reference-dose levels of pesticides, the EWG has set up a new scare that might diminish, rather than improve, the quality of the diet fed to America's children. According to ACSH President Dr. Elizabeth M. Whelan, "It would be a shame if this poorly designed report were to scare parents away from health-promoting foods like fruits. Scientists agree that a diet high in fruits and vegetables is an important foundation for a healthy lifestyle and the levels of pesticides described in this report do not undermine that important conclusion."

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