

Avoiding Pesky Produce Pesticides

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Previously published on Intellihealth.com, April 27, 2004*

Every day we're bombarded with news about bacteria-tainted meat and pesticide-laden produce. In the United States we expect our produce to be free of such contaminants, but there is a growing concern about the safety of our food supply. Fresh fruits and veggies are an important component of a nutritious diet because they are packed with vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals, and fiber. So how can we reap the benefits of healthful produce, but ensure they're 100 percent safe?

Food Production And Pesticide Use

Food production and distribution methods have changed over the years, leading to new safety issues. For example, to optimize crop yields many farmers increasingly turn to pesticides to control undesired insects, weeds, rodents, fungi and bacteria. Antibiotics are added to animal feed to counteract the growing number of bacteria. However, these bacteria are becoming resistant to the antibiotics. These "super" strains of bacteria grow inside animals and can be passed on to humans through tainted meat and eggs. Fruits and vegetables can become contaminated when they are shipped or prepared with animal products harboring bacteria.

We know that the healthful benefits of produce are greater than the risk of pesticide exposure. However, today concern is mounting about the ways that pesticides could affect people, especially pregnant women and young children.

In 1997, Congress passed the Food Quality Protection Act, which requires all pesticides to be proven safe for infants and children. If a pesticide is unsafe for children or information is lacking about its safety, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is responsible for setting safety levels for its use. This strategy may help to minimize pesticide use in the long run.

The EPA also approves every pesticide before its use on foods, monitors pesticide residues in foods, and surveys which such foods children consume in greater amounts. Some pesticides are rated by the EPA as known or possible carcinogens.

But the risk from pesticides is still uncertain, not thoroughly studied, and worrisome to consumers. It makes sense that we should try to reduce our exposure to them, but how do we do this?

Going Organic

What does organic produce mean? As defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), organic foods are those grown without the use of pesticides, petroleum- or

sewage-based fertilizers, antibiotics, synthetic hormones, genetic engineering, or irradiation.

So how can we identify organic foods? As of October 2002, the USDA began labeling organic foods with an organic seal of approval. To be labeled "100 percent organic," the food has to be certified by the USDA. A food can claim to be "organic" if it contains 95 percent organic ingredients. Foods with 70 percent to 95 percent organic ingredients can claim to be "made with organic ingredients". If a food has less than 70 percent organic ingredients, the word organic must be relegated to the ingredient list.

Although there is no solid evidence that organic foods are healthier for consumers, emerging studies show that organic produce is less likely to contain pesticides. Pesticide residue has been in 13 percent to 23 percent of organic produce and 71 percent to 90 percent of conventionally grown produce.

To reduce the risk of pesticide exposure, follow some of the food-safety tips below to insure the safest and tastiest produce:

1. **Eat organic** when you can. If this option is too costly or not readily available, select organic produce to replace the most contaminated fruits and veggies from the table below.
2. Choose conventionally grown produce from the least **contaminated** fruits and veggies from the table below.
3. **Buy locally grown produce** when in season. You may want to inquire about pesticide use. Check with your state's cooperative extension service for a list of farmers' markets.
4. **Wash your produce** with cold, running water. Peel thick-skinned produce and trim outer leaves of greens. Water is effective as produce washes when it comes to non-waxed fruits and veggies. Washing produce with water can reduce bacteria 10-fold. However, produce washes may help to remove the wax coating from produce such as apples, peppers, cucumbers or tomatoes. Edible wax is applied to trap moisture and keep produce fresh longer, but dirt and pesticide residues can get trapped underneath.
5. **Keep produce and animal food preparation separate.** Use one cutting board for meats, fish, chicken and another board for produce. After every use wash boards, knives and other kitchen utensils thoroughly with soap and water.
6. Finally, **always wash your hands** prior to any type of food prep, and wash hands when switching from meat to produce preparation.

Keep in mind that fruits and veggies are loaded with healthful benefits that outweigh the risks of possible pesticides. Diets based on fruits, vegetables, and grains can help to lower your cancer risk by as much as 20 percent. The bottom line: Eat a variety of fruits and veggies daily and treat yourself and your family to a new one every week!

Most And Least Contaminated Produce

Conventionally Grown Fruits And Vegetables	
12 Most Contaminated	12 Least Contaminated
Peaches	Sweet corn
Strawberries	Avocado
Apples	Pineapples
Spinach	Cauliflower
Nectarines	Mangoes
Celery	Sweet peas
Pears	Asparagus
Cherries	Onions
Potatoes	Broccoli
Bell peppers	Bananas
Raspberries	Kiwifruit
Grapes, imported	Papaya

Source: Environmental Working Group