



Is Organic Food Really No Better Than Other Foods?

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The Food Standards Agency (FSA), UK, issued a report last week [claiming that there is no evidence of any significant benefits to human health from consuming organic foods](#). It is surprising that such a claim could be made from a public health agency after what could best be described as rather limited research - according to much of the British press.

Some facts about the study:

- It did not include papers that were not written in English - estimated to be about half of all good quality studies.
- It did not include research from the European Union published in April, 2009.
- It ignored a study by scientists at Rhode Island Hospital which [found a substantial link between increased levels of nitrates in our environment and food, with increased deaths from diseases, including Alzheimer's, diabetes mellitus and Parkinson's](#). The study was published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* (Volume 17:3 July 2009). Fair enough, this was published after the FSA had concluded their research. However, everyone knew this study was ongoing. Why not wait a little bit longer until it was completed?
- It did not use the top British centers of excellence in this field to carry out the study. Scientists at the Nafferton Ecological Farming Group at Newcastle University, in one of many studies, found that [grazing cows on organic farms in the UK produce milk which contains significantly higher beneficial fatty acids, antioxidants and vitamins than their conventional 'high input' counterparts](#). A nationwide British daily newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, could not understand why the FSA used the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine to carry out the study - a center of excellence, but not renowned as a leading center in this field - instead of, for example Newcastle University.

Why do people choose organic?

Putting the health issue to one side, there are many other reasons people wish to buy organic - two of them are listed below:

- **The environment**
 - The effect on life forms within the soil - if you look at video footage of tractors ploughing fields forty years ago you will notice there used to be a sizeable number of birds gobbling up worms and bugs. Today there are very few of them, and sometimes none at all.
 - [There are significantly more birds, butterflies, beetles, bats and wild flowers on organic farms than conventional farms](#).
 - Protection of endangered species - intensive farming is known to have a negative impact on the future of many endangered species. *"A staggering 5 million skylarks are estimated to have vanished in the past 30 years as a result of agricultural intensification,"* (Speech given by Sir John Krebs, Chair of the Food Standards Agency at Queen's University, Belfast, on 5 November 2003).
 - Coastal waters - there is much less run-off of nutrients from organic farms, compared to other farms, which cause algae blooms in coastal waters.
 - Organic farming encourages practices which are more in line with measures to combat climate change. An example is the use of solar powered fertility through crops like red clover that fix nitrogen into the soil for subsequent crops.

- **Animal welfare (farm animals)**

As organically farmed animals are encouraged to pursue natural behavior, which usually includes plenty of space, more natural feeding habits, as well as receiving fewer drugs and antibiotics, their quality of life is generally better compared to animals in other farms. In the vast majority of cases, organic farms with livestock have free-range animals. In every organic poultry farm in the UK, birds are kept in smaller flocks and spend much more of their time roaming outside on fresh grass - they also have considerably more indoor space, compared to non-organic poultry farms.

What about unknown long-term complications?

Can we really say organic is not better for health if we do not have enough long term evidence?

Scientists at Emory University, the University of Washington, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), found that [by substituting elementary school-age children's foods with just organic products, the concentration of the organophosphorus pesticides found in their bodies decreased substantially to non-detectable levels until the conventional diets were re-introduced.](#)

The researchers were specifically measuring the exposure of two organophosphorus pesticides - malathion and chlorpyrifos. Research team leader, Dr. Lu said "During the days when children consumed organic diets, most of their urine samples contained zero concentration for the malathion metabolite. However, once the children returned to their conventional diets, the average malathion metabolite concentration increased to 1.6 parts per billion with a concentration range from 5 to 263 parts per billion."

An elementary school child will most likely live another 70, 80 or even 90 years. We cannot and should not ignore potential long-term complications.

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