

## IS IT TIME TO ADD ORGANIC TO THE FOOD PYRAMID?<sup>1</sup>

Emily Main<sup>©</sup>

Should the government be encouraging organic food? As the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services work to revise the Dietary Guidelines for Americans this year, one organic trade group is answering that question with a resounding "YES!" After all, pesticides on food have been linked to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and been found to interfere with sexual development, among hundreds of other health and environmental ills. But dietitians say that encouraging people to eat only organic could turn off an already veggie-phobic American populace.

### The Study

A committee assembled by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services revises the Dietary Guidelines for Americans every five years, and their revisions are used to make up the food pyramid. This year, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines that have currently been drafted place a heavy emphasis on shifting the American diet from one in which 35 percent of calories come from solid fats and added sugars to one that incorporates more vegetables, dry beans and peas, fruits, whole grains, nuts and seeds, in addition to higher intake of healthy fats from seafood and low-fat dairy and lower intake of meats, eggs, and poultry.

On its face, that approach is sound, considering the growing obesity epidemic in this country. However, later on in its recommendations the committee writes that "Our current understanding of conventional [i.e. grown with synthetic chemical pesticides] and organically produced foods indicate that their nutritional value and contributions to human health are similar." That's the statement with which the industry-oriented Organic Trade Association took issue. At a public hearing on July 8, the association's executive director and CEO Christine Bushway said that the statement was "neither grounded in current science nor relevant to the mandate of the Dietary Guidelines" and that it could confuse consumers, particularly in light of the recent President's Cancer Panel report. That report noted that Americans are bombarded with hundreds of potentially cancerous chemicals, including pesticides that can end up on our food or in our waterways from industrial farm runoff. Agricultural pesticides have been linked to a variety of cancers, including childhood leukemia and bladder cancer. The two physicians who authored that report concluded that "Exposure to pesticides can be decreased by choosing, to the extent possible, food grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers... Similarly, exposure to antibiotics, growth hormones, and toxic runoff from livestock feed lots can be minimized by eating free-range meat raised without these medications." In other words, eat organic food.

In her statement, Bushway added that "It is inconceivable and alarming that the very document that is the underpinning of our nation's policies regarding food and nutrition would include a statement that directly contradicts these recommendations and certainly does not meet the stated goals of the committee to speak with 'one nutrition voice.'"

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## Results

The evidence linking pesticides on food to cancer does contradict the Dietary Guidelines statement that chemically and organically produced foods are no different when it comes to "contributions to human health." "Avoiding foods grown with chemical pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, growth hormones and antibiotics is one way to lower your cancer risk according to the President's Cancer Panel," says Amanda Kimble-Evans, associate editor at the non-profit Rodale Institute, which has been studying the differences in chemical and organic farming since the 1970s, and looking for certified organic food is the only way to guarantee you're avoiding those chemicals. "I would say that is a very clear positive contribution to human health that only certified organic foods can claim."

However, some in the nutrition world feel the issue could be more complicated if people are encouraged to eat only organic. "If we're growing things organically, there's no doubt that it's better for the planet and that people will be exposed to fewer chemicals," says Katherine Tallmadge, RD, spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. At the same time, she adds, "decades of research have found that [diets rich in] plant foods—particularly fruits and vegetables—are protective against cancer, and all of those studies have used conventionally [chemically] grown produce." While it's nice to have the choice of organic, she adds, the higher cost can turn people off and have other undesirable side effects, particularly among people who don't already eat healthy foods. "Is this going to discourage people from eating fruits and vegetables by telling them they're poisonous?"

She adds that people—as well as the environment, our water supply, local farms and local food systems—could benefit from encouragement to eat local, seasonal produce, which is often produced organically and at costs comparable to the chemically-treated produce. And often people will choose local, seasonal produce when given the opportunity.

We at Rodale.com have always encouraged people to eat organic, and we still think you should, whether the USDA agrees or not. Here are a few ways to make it easier and more affordable:

### (1) Demand Organic

The fastest way to make organic food more affordable is to increase demand. Call your local supermarket owner and ask him or her to increase the amount and variety of organic produce being sold.

### (2) Shop local

Visiting your local farmer's market will usually cost you less than driving to your local grocery store. Stock up on seasonal produce now, when supplies are ample and tasty, and learn how to freeze, can, pickle and preserve it for the winter, so you don't end up buying mealy, tasteless produce that's been shipped from abroad during the off season.

### (3) Buy frozen

Studies are finding that frozen produce is often more nutritious than what's on the grocer's shelves because it's picked at peak ripeness and frozen immediately afterwards to retain its flavor and nutrient value. Frozen organic produce is often a good economical choice, particularly in winter when local vegetables like corn, peas, and peppers are hard to come by. Just watch out for added salt and sugar, which are sometimes added to frozen produce as preservatives.