I'll have my veggies untainted please

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For over a decade, organic farming has become one of the fastest growing segments of agriculture in the United States. According to the EPA, over 40 private and state agencies once certified organic food but each held different standards for growing and labeling. By the end of the 80s the organic industry petitioned congress to draft a bill that would define "organic".

The question is: "What is considered 'organic' and is it really any better for you?"

The term "organic farming" was first introduced in the 40s by Lord James Northbourne, a noted agriculturalist and author, he described in his book "Look to the Land" a more ecologically balanced method of farming as opposed to excessive use of fertilizers and chemicals.

As defined by the USDA National Organic Standards Board: "Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony."

In layman's terms, to be considered organic, farmers must incorporate the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations. In addition, meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products are considered organic when they come from animals that are not treated with antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic crops are produced without the use of conventional pesticides, fertilizers that contain synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering, genetic modification or ionizing radiation.

Before a product can be labeled "organic," a government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make sure the farmer is following all the rules necessary to meet the USDA standards. "The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people," according to the USDA website. Companies or processors that handle organic products must also be certified.

There is little evidence that organic and conventional foods differ in respect to the concentrations of the various micronutrients (vitamins, minerals and trace elements). However, one study cited in "Environmental Health Perspectives," found that an organic diet significantly lowered children's dietary exposure to organophosphorus pesticides. These chemicals account for 70 percent of pesticide use in the United States, 90 million pounds per year. It is found in products such as: Dursban, Lorsban and Sevin.

Dursban and Lorsban which contain the organophosphorus pesticide chlorpyrifos, is used on stored grain, seed treatment and on grain bins and warehouses to prevent borers, beetles, moths, weevils and mealworms. Chlorpyrifos was recently banned by the EPA for residential use.

Sevin contains carbamate carbaryl which is used on many agricultural products including fruit and nut trees, fruits and vegetables and grain crops. According to the EPA Fact Sheet, "Crops with the greatest amount (most pounds) of annual carbaryl use include apples, pecans, grapes, alfalfa, oranges and corn. Crops with the highest percent of acres treated include asparagus, okra, cranberries, apples, blueberries, sweet cherries, pumpkins and strawberries." Carbaryls are also used by homeowners for lawn care, gardening and for pet care. In the U.S., 3.9 million pounds of carbaryl active ingredient are sold annually. Carbaryl is also classified as a possible human carcinogen based on vascular tumors in mice.

According to the EPA, "Exposure to chlorpyrifos [and carbaryls] can over stimulate the nervous system causing nausea, dizziness, confusion and in high exposures, respiratory paralysis and death. In addition, systemic toxicity may include body weight loss, decreased food consumption, liver, kidney and adrenal pathology."

While it may be possible to wash pesticide residues from some products, it is not possible to wash all products treated. Switching to organic food does, as science proves, decrease consumers exposure to chemicals that pose significant health risks.

Graphic by Kelsey Adams