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Organic Produce – is it the best choice?

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Most of us would like to feed ourselves and our families the most nutritious foods we can. Sometimes it is difficult to know what that best choice would be. Marketers would have us think organic is best, but a report in the December issue of Tufts Health and Nutrition Letter describes an analysis of current research that indicates that nutrient-wise, organic may not be as great as once thought. And yet there are other reasons to think organic produce is a better choice.

Dr. Crystal Smith-Spangler and colleagues at Stanford University looked at research done over 40 years. The studies they reviewed on organic produce, meats and dairy did not indicate that these organic options had any significant difference in nutrient value (except phosphorus) when compared to their conventionally-grown counterparts. And phosphorus is a nutrient that is not generally a concern in most people's diets.

Another reason organic produce may be the better choice is its expected low levels of pesticide contamination. The Tufts newsletter reports Dr. Smith-Spangler's findings that, "While 38 percent of conventional produce contained traces of pesticides – almost always below government safety limits, however – only 7 percent of organic fruits and vegetables contained detectable pesticides." And yes, even though the produce was grown organically, there can be slight unintentional contamination via pesticide drift from neighboring non-organic farms and transfer during transport, storage and distribution with conventional products.

So how does one select fresh, organic produce? One helpful hint at a grocery store is to look at the Price Look Up or PLU number on the sticker on the individual fruit or vegetable, on the band holding a bunch together or on the package. This number will be five digits and start with a 9 for organic produce. The PLU number also tells variety and sometimes even its sized category and if it came from East/Central North America. This could be important if one is looking for a specific, favorite fruit, say, a large, organic Empire apple grown in New England – the PLU number would be 94126. When purchasing organic produce directly from a grower, find out how the product was grown. For producers with less than \$5000 gross annual income from sales, there is no regulation to guarantee production methods. Most will be glad to explain all they have done to make their produce better for their consumers.

Consider the benefits, and the hype, of choosing and eating organic produce and decide if it is worth it for you and your family.

For more information on the choice of organic produce or any other topic, please feel free to contact me, Janet Hackert, Nutrition and Health Education Specialist, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.