



## The Organic Food Movement—Too Little, Too Late

At the McDougall Program we do not actively teach people to buy organic foods because the immediate health benefits would be imperceptible and the harm to the health of a few participants from this extra requirement would be substantial. Yet, in the McDougall home, we make every effort to buy organic foods for ourselves. And, if you ask me directly, I will tell you to shop for organic foods. Does this seem like double talk?

My patients are overweight and sick because they have learned to eat, from childhood, the richest diet known to humankind—a diet of animals, oils, and sugars. Dining for a lifetime on “organically farmed” meat, poultry, fish, cheese, milk, honey, and flour would have caused them the exact same states of poor health. Along the same lines of thought, switching my patients to conventionally grown potatoes, rice, corn, vegetables, and fruits results in profound improvements in their health in 10-days—organic varieties of these plant foods would have not made a speck of difference.



Dietary change is difficult. Immediate improvements, such as relief of chest pain, indigestion, headaches, arthritis, constipation, oily skin, along with reductions in cholesterol, triglycerides, blood pressure, body weight, and the need for medications are some of the benefits that follow this change and encourage future compliance. Insisting on organically grown, instead of conventionally grown, fruits and vegetables would place an additional obstacle before patients increasing their chances of failure—and in so doing harm their health. Fortunately, the decisions to eat organic and the McDougall Diet are not mutually exclusive—you can, and should, do both.

### What's Organic?

The term “organically grown food” refers to products produced in accordance with the principles and practices of organic agriculture. Various countries legally regulate organic food. In the US, Canada, Japan, and the European Union, producers must obtain certification in order to label their products “organic.” Traditionally, organic farming has been tied to small farms, but since the early 1990s, with a growth rate of 20% a year, organic food production has become the business of large companies, such as Kraft, Pepsi, General Mills, Kellogg, Conagra, Coca-Cola, M&M Mars, and Hershey, to name a few well recognized giants in the industry. Currently, organic food accounts for only 1 to 2% of food sales worldwide.

Many people perceive organic as an unwise purchase. Because of intensive labor practices, such as crop rotations, natural pest control, and the use of manures, most organic foods cost more. Organic fruits and vegetables are not treated with waxes and preservatives, which results in earlier spoilage. They can be odd shaped, discolored, and smaller. In most cases, however, organic foods look identical to their conventional counterparts. Tests show consumers find no taste difference between organically grown and conventional foods.

**Goals of organic farming include:**

Increase long-term fertility of soils

Minimize all forms of pollution

Avoid the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides

Maintain genetic diversity

Produce high quality food

Use local resources rather than importing long distance

Keep use of fossil fuels to a minimum.

Single foods, such as bananas, asparagus, or lettuce are designated as “organic” based on compliance to designated farming practices. In the US, foods that have several ingredients, such as breakfast cereal, can use the USDA organic seal or the following wording on their package labels:

**100 percent organic:** Products are completely organic or made of all organic ingredients.

**Organic:** Products that are at least 95 percent organic.

**Made with organic ingredients:** Products contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients.

The organic certification label is not a guarantee that the product complies with the organic standards. Inspection of farming practices is spotty and can be especially problematic for items produced in poorly regulated countries.

**Organic Does Not Mean Healthy**

You would think better soil nutrient recycling (composting), crop rotation to avoid soil mineral depletion, and encouragement of the soil microorganisms that improve nutrient uptake would result in nutritionally superior food on your dinner plate. The truth is there is no conclusive evidence that shows that organic fruits and vegetables are more nutritious than are conventionally grown ones.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, “organic” certification does not claim that these products are safer except for the pesticide issue discussed below.<sup>2</sup>

Real harm to the public is caused when the organic label is placed on inherently unhealthy products. Production of meat and dairy products by organic standards is as meaningful as the production of tobacco for cigarettes and rye for whiskey by organic standards. How does that saying go? “Putting lipstick on a sow’s ear won’t turn it into a silk purse.” Advertising campaigns are misleading people into believing burgers, chips, cakes and biscuits that are marked “organic” are good for us.

**Organic Food Is Cleaner**

The use of fossil-fuel-derived pesticides and fertilizers began near the end of World War II. Currently, nearly all of the 450 pesticides that are allowed in conventional farming are prohibited in organic farming, and the seven that are allowed are not used routinely. These prohibited chemicals are involved in the cause of four emotionally-charged health issues: birth defects, infertility, brain damage (Parkinson's



## Immaterial

Disease) and cancers of children (neuroblastoma, leukemia, etc.) and adults (breast, pancreatic, etc.). Children fed a diet of organic foods are exposed to six to nine times fewer toxic pesticides than are children fed a conventional diet.<sup>3</sup>

Getting back to the theme of this newsletter, buying organic is not the most effective way to reduce your intake of potentially dangerous environmental chemicals. Switching from animal-food to plant-food is the most effective. Estimates are 89% to 99% of the chemical intake into our body is from our food, and most of this is from foods high on the food chain: meat, poultry, fish, and dairy products.<sup>4-6</sup> In his Pulitzer Prize nominated book, *How to Survive in America the Poisoned*, Lewis Regenstein writes: "Meat contains approximately 14 times more pesticides than do plant foods... Thus, by eating foods of animal origin, one ingests greatly concentrated amounts of hazardous chemicals." The reason for these high levels of contamination is because most pesticides and herbicides are attracted to and stored in fat. Low levels found on the grasses and grains that are fed to the chicken, pigs and cattle accumulate in their body fat in very high concentrations for people to eat.

Until the end of the Second World War, farmers produced bountiful harvests without relying on pesticides and other toxic chemicals. There is no reason why the world cannot do so again. Most people who have ever walked this earth have followed primarily plant-food (starch)-based diets. We can do that again too.

**Buyer's Tips<sup>7</sup>**

These foods traditionally have the highest pesticide residue: Apples, Peaches, Bell peppers, Pears, Celery, Potatoes, Cherries, Raspberries, Imported grapes, Spinach, Nectarines, and Strawberries. Spending extra for organic varieties of these is wise.

These foods traditionally have the lowest pesticide residue: Asparagus, Kiwis, Avocados, Mangoes, Bananas, Onions, Broccoli, Papayas, Cauliflower, Pineapples, Sweet corn, and Sweet peas. Buying conventionally grown seems relatively safe.

Other important steps to remove chemicals would be to wash and scrub produce under streaming water (do not use soap), peel fruits and vegetables, and remove the outer leaves of leafy vegetables.

**Eating Organic to Save Fossil Fuels**

# Irrelevant

The harnessing of fossil fuels allowed for the world's population explosion from 1 billion people at the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 6.3 billion at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time fossil fuel dependency has led us to the verge of planetary destruction. One of the primary goals of the organic movement is to save the Earth. Organic farming of plant-foods for people will minimize environmental damage by abandoning the use of oil-derived pesticides and fertilizers. These chemicals, for example, account for half of the energy input in conventional potato and winter wheat production and up to 80 per cent of the energy consumed in some vegetable crops.<sup>8</sup>

The food supply in the United States requires the use of about 530 liters of "oil equivalents" per person annually, just for the agricultural sector.<sup>9</sup> However, this is just a fraction of the total fossil energy expended—processing, packaging, and distribution

increase the commercial energy consumption by more than 3 times. Organic products that are transported long distances, particularly by airplane, are as environmentally damaging as conventional foods. Buying plant foods locally, especially from Farmer's Markets, can be very environmentally and pocket-book friendly.

Abandoning the meat and dairy foods—organically or conventionally raised—would result in the largest savings in fossil fuels. Consider just for their growing needs, the average energy input from fossil fuels is 25 Calories in order to produce 1 Calorie of animal protein. This is more than 11 times greater than the 2.2 Calories of fossil energy that are required for 1 Calorie of grain protein production.<sup>10</sup>

## **“Organic” Meat and Milk Are Still Meat and Milk**

“Organic farming” and “environmentally friendly” will remain contradictions until the movement abandons “organic” livestock production. According to a report, *Livestock’s Long Shadow –Environmental Issues and Options*, released in November of 2006 from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, livestock emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to every one of the most serious environmental problems.

Livestock (beef cattle, dairy cattle, chickens, pigs, and a few other animals domesticated for food uses) produced by even the highest organic standards will still generate, from their belching, flatus, and manure, 18% of the world’s greenhouse gasses. The same 26 percent of the ice-free terrestrial surface of the planet will be required for grazing and the same 33 percent of the total arable land of our planet will still be dedicated to producing feed crops for these “organic” animals. Nothing saved here by going organic.

## **We Can Fix Our Food Supply**

Environmental threats combined with energy scarcity are already causing food shortages and increasing prices—and there is every reason to expect rapid escalation of these problems. I believe we have enough time, knowledge, money, energy, and political power to make massive transformations in our food systems. Switching to organic practices of plant food production is important for long-term sustainability. However, the one crucial step that must be taken now is the universal adoption of the same principles I teach individuals to save their lives at the McDougall Program: changing to a starch-based diet. On average, land requirements for meat-protein production are 10 times greater than for plant-protein production. About 40% of the world’s grain harvest is fed to animals. Half of this amount of grain would be more than enough to feed all the people on our planet.<sup>11</sup> Almost overnight, the principles of the McDougall Diet will feed 7 billion inhabitants for the next generation and beyond. You may laugh, but this change will not be a matter of choice.

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