

Sustainable Foods: We really are what we eat

When you think of eating healthy, do you have images of a flavorful, seasonal and colorful meal made with whole food ingredients from local and sustainable farms?

... A delicious salad made with freshly picked lettuce greens, organic strawberries, walnuts and cheese from a nearby farmer who doesn't use synthetic growth hormones or antibiotics in her cows; a dish of lightly sautéed red, orange and green vegetables picked that morning by a farmer who uses integrated pest management practices rather than pesticides and herbicides; savory roasted chicken from a farm where the animals run free on pasture; or baked Atlantic mackerel, a seafood from the northeast which is low in heavy metals and caught in a sustainable manner.

Women are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of eating whole foods that are more nutritious and knowing more about how our food has been grown or produced. We are realizing that the chemicals used in agriculture are winding up in our rivers, our drinking water, and in our bodies. Foods grown in an environmentally-sound manner, without toxic chemicals, have the benefits of improving our health, keeping unwanted chemicals out of our bodies, and reducing our risk of disease. Through our purchasing power, we can influence how our foods are produced, decrease our health risks, and take care of the environment we live in.

To help us with our decision-making, there are a few easy guides that have been developed. The Environmental Working Group (EWG), a DC-based non-profit organization, has created a list called the Dirty Dozen that is comprised of the 12 fruits and vegetables that typically have the highest amount of pesticide residues, unless they are labeled "certified organic" (See Box for definition). They have also created the corollary list called the "Cleanest Twelve," that contains the fruits and vegetables with the lowest pesticide residues. By eating the 12 most contaminated fruits and vegetables, a person will be exposed to about 14 pesticides per day, on average. Alternatively, by eating the Cleanest Twelve, a person's exposure is limited to less than 2 pesticides per day.

DIRTY DOZEN

Buy These Organic

Peaches
Apples
Sweet Bell Peppers
Celery
Nectarines
Strawberries
Cherries
Lettuce
Grapes (Imported)
Pears
Spinach
Potatoes

CLEANEST TWELVE

Lowest in Pesticides

Onions
Avocado
Sweet Corn (Frozen)
Pineapples
Mango
Sweet Peas (Frozen)
Asparagus
Kiwi
Bananas
Cabbage
Broccoli
Eggplant

www.ewg.org

According to EWG, people can lower their pesticide exposure by almost 90 percent by avoiding the Dirty Dozen and choosing the Cleanest Twelve. Pesticides, by definition, are chemicals that do one of the following: repel a pest, kill a pest, or prevent its reproduction. Long-term, low-level exposure to pesticides has been linked to an array of chronic health problems, including cancer, birth defects, neurological, reproductive and behavioral effects, and impaired immune function.

Pesticides are just one type of the unnecessary chemicals that are used in our food production. Two others are recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH) and the routine use of antibiotics in animal food production. Synthetic bovine growth hormones (rBGH or rBST) are used on 10 –

15% of the nation's dairy farms. They are given to dairy cows so that they will produce more milk. There have been enough concerns raised regarding the use of this drug that all 27 countries of the European Union have banned its use. Dairy products produced from cows that are given rBGH have been found to have higher levels of another hormone, insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1), and while there are no studies which show that people who drink milk produced with rBGH have an increased incidence of cancer, there are studies indicating that people who have colon, breast and prostate cancer have higher levels of this naturally occurring hormone, IGF-1. To reduce potential exposure, purchase milk, yogurt and other dairy products from dairies that are rBGH-free or certified organic. Sustainable Table, a website hosted by the non-profit organization GRACE, has a list of dairy products that are rBGH-free (see Food Resources below).

A significant amount of animal food production is now being done on very large scale "industrialized" farms. Where we once had family farms, we now find concentrated feedlots. Animals raised under these conditions are often given antibiotics in their feed to increase their rate of growth and to compensate for the unhealthy, confined conditions. In fact, 70% of all antibiotics used in the U.S. are used in animal agriculture. This routine use of antibiotics increases the chance for antibiotic resistant bacteria to develop in the animals, in the soil and water that surrounds them, and in our food. You can limit your exposure to these foods and the potential exposure to antibiotic resistant bacteria by purchasing foods from farmers who do not routinely use antibiotics and allow their animals to graze on pasture. See the Food Resources section below for online directories of farms with sustainably produced poultry and meat products.

Seafood is a great source of nutrition. Unfortunately, some fish are so contaminated with mercury that the risks outweigh the benefits. So it's important to choose fish that are likely to have the least amount of mercury. As a very general rule the largest fish, like tuna and swordfish, are more likely to contain higher levels of mercury. This is because the mercury in the water and the plant food bioaccumulates in the smaller fish and then builds up in higher concentrations as one moves up the marine food chain. For this reason, avoid King Mackerel, Swordfish, Tilefish and Bluefin Tuna. When buying canned tuna, choose 'light' skipjack over 'white' albacore. For most other varieties of tuna, adults should eat no more than 1 serving per week and children no more than 2-3 servings per month, if at all. Here's some guidance on seafood selection from Environmental Defense, a New York-based non-profit organization.

Better Seafood Choices:

Anchovies
Clams
Crab, king (U.S.)
Crab, snow/tanner
Crawfish (U.S.)
Haddock (trawl)
Herring, Atlantic
Lobster, American/Maine
Mackerel, Atlantic
Mussels, blue
Oysters (farmed)
Salmon, wild (Alaska)
Sardines
Scallops, bay (farmed)
Shrimp, pink (Oregon)
Squid
Tilapia, (Latin America)
Tilapia, (U.S.)
Trout, rainbow (farmed)

www.edf.org

Finally, consider becoming a member of a nearby organic farmer's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, which allows you to purchase an annual share of the farm's harvest at the beginning of the year and then pick up your food from a weekly delivery location. Buying food grown in your region increases your food's freshness, decreases your carbon footprint from food travel miles, and supports your local farmers and the local economy.

Here is a summary of 6 food choices that will improve your health and the health of the environment.

EAT

1. "Certified Organic" foods, when possible
2. More of the "Cleanest Twelve" fruits and vegetables and less of the "Dirty Dozen" (see boxes)
3. Dairy products produced without the use of synthetic hormones
4. Poultry and meat produced without the routine use of antibiotics
5. Fish with the lowest risks for containing mercury
6. Local and seasonal foods

Definition of Organic Food

"Organic food is produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; 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 USDA organic standards. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to your local supermarket or restaurant must be certified, too."

www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/ofp/ofp.shtml

Food Resources

Environmental Working Group www.ewg.org

For fruits and vegetables with the highest and lowest pesticide residues, click on "Health" and then on "Food" (wallet-sized cards available).

Sustainable Table www.sustainabletable.org

For rBGH-free dairy products, click on "The Issues" and then "rBGH."

To locate farmers, caterers, restaurants and more in your zip code, click on the "Eat Well Guide."

To find farms with "no antibiotic use" or "no routine antibiotic use", type this exact phrase with your zip code in the "Advanced Search" on the Eat Well Guide.

Maryland Department of Agriculture www.mda.state.md.us

For certified organic farms, farmers' markets and CSAs in Maryland, click on "Maryland Products"

Future Harvest–Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture www.futureharvestcasa.org

To locate farms where animals are raised on pasture in MD, VA, WVA, click on “Amazing Grazing Directory.”

Environmental Defense Fund www.edf.org

For levels of contamination in different types of seafood, type in “Health Alerts” in the search box. For best and worst eco-friendly (sustainably caught) seafood, click on “Seafood Selector.”

Local Harvest www.localharvest.org

To locate local and organic farms, CSAs, farmers’ markets, restaurants, grocery stores, and farm products.

Maryland Cooperative Extension www.mastergardener.umd.edu

For classes in Master Gardening and Master Composting to learn how to grow your own food.

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