

# Organic Foods and Children

by Elaine Lipson

## What does "organic" mean?

The organic label on foods tells you that the food was grown and produced in accordance with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic standards. Except for farms that sell less than \$5000 of organic products per year, all those who sell organic food must have their practices certified (by an agent accredited by USDA's National Organic Program) as compliant with federal law governing organics.

USDA organic standards are specific and detailed. In broad strokes, the standards prohibit synthetic pesticides, genetically modified ingredients, irradiation, and the use of biosolids (sewage sludge) as fertilizer. Organic livestock eat organic feed and are not given antibiotics or hormones, and have access to pasture. Producers keep written audit trails to demonstrate that organic integrity is maintained throughout farming, processing, production and transportation of organic foods.

In order to farm successfully within these rules, organic farmers use a variety of methods to create ecosystems that are balanced, naturally pest-resistant, and appropriate to the climate and the region.

Visit [www.usda.gov/nop](http://www.usda.gov/nop) to learn more about the National Organic Program and organic certification.

## Why Organic Foods May Matter Most to Children

In the past decade, research and analysis has shown that children may be much more at risk than adults for pesticide exposure, and may suffer greater harm to health and development from exposure. Yet standards for safety and tolerance limits for these chemicals rarely include adequate consideration of risks to children.

Recent laws now mandate factoring in these risks and re-evaluating safety limits, but the wheels of re-evaluation have turned very slowly. Organic foods, therefore, may be especially important to more fully protect children from the risks of exposure, even when pesticide levels in foods are within existing legal limits.

Why are children at greater risk? First, they ingest more food and water per pound of body weight than adults, so any exposure is greater in proportion to their size. Second, these chemicals may be more harmful to developing organs and bodily systems, including neurological and reproductive systems, than they are to mature bodies.

In a study published in May 2002 in *Food Additives and Contaminants*, organic foods were shown to have significantly lower pesticide residues than conventionally grown foods (for a number of reasons, such as persistent residues in soil that last for many years, some organic foods may still show residue).

Other studies show the environmental benefits of organic agriculture to air, soil and water, lowering the total toxic burden to our ecosystems. As demand for organic foods continues to grow, more farmers are likely to view organic methods as a viable and marketable option, helping to stabilize supply and price.

It adds up to an evolving landscape that increasingly allows for--and makes a compelling and credible case for--including organic foods in children's diets whenever possible. As concerned parents, teachers, administrators and foodservice professionals create and insist on innovation and reform in school lunch programs, organic foods make sense as part of the picture.

## Learn More About Children, Pesticides, and Organic Foods:

### BOOKS:

Wargo, John. *Our Children's Toxic Legacy: How Science and Law Fail to Protect Us from Pesticides* (Yale University Press, Second Edition, 1998)

Landrigan, Philip J. et al. *Raising Healthy Children in a Toxic World: 101 Smart Solutions for Every Family* (Rodale Press, 2002)

Lipson, Elaine. *The Organic Foods Sourcebook* (Mcgraw-Hill Contemporary, 2001).

### ON THE WEB:

Environmental Working Group

[www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org)

EWG has conducted research and published many substantive reports on children, pesticides, and other environmental toxins and concerns. Visit the site for downloadable reports, including "How 'Bout Them Apples? Pesticides in Children's Food Ten Years After Alar"; "Overexposed: Organophosphate Insecticides in Children's Food"; and more.

Children's Health Environmental Coalition

[www.checnet.org](http://www.checnet.org)

Organic Trade Association

[www.ota.com](http://www.ota.com) (see also [www.organic-center.org](http://www.organic-center.org))

### REPORTS and ARTICLES:

National Academy of Sciences. *Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children*. Washington: National Academy Press, 1993.

"How Safe is Our Produce?" *Consumer Reports*, March 1999

Baker BP et al. "Pesticide residues in conventional, IPM-grown and organic foods: Insights from three U.S. data sets." *Food Additives and Contaminants*, 19(5), May 2002.



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