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Why You Shouldn't Panic About Pesticide In Produce

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Apples made the top of the list for produce containing pesticide residue, but how much is unsafe?

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The Environmental Working Group, a non-profit health advocacy organization, says you should be concerned about pesticide residues in fruits and vegetables, but not so concerned that you stop eating these foods.

That's the mixed message delivered in the eighth edition of EWG's annual Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce released today.

The guide begins by telling readers to "eat your fruits and vegetables." Then it offers a detailed list of every pesticide found along the produce aisle, as well as reminders that "some pesticides pose health dangers to people."

So what's a consumer to do?

Look beyond the fearful rhetoric, says Joseph Schwarcz, director of the Office for Science and Society at McGill University in Montreal.

Take apples, Schwarcz says. They occupy the top spot on EWG's "dirty dozen" list of the most contaminated fruits and vegetables (followed by celery and red peppers). The group notes that nearly all apples contain detectable levels of pesticide residues.

But it's a mistake to "equate the presence of a chemical with the presence of risk," Schwarcz says. "Where is the evidence that these trace residues are dangerous?"

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There just isn't much there, he says.

And a look at the government database EWG used to compile the guide doesn't turn up anything very alarming, he adds.

The database, maintained by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, shows that just 1 of 744 apple samples it tested had a pesticide residue level higher than the government

limit. And most were far below the permissible level.

Results were similar for fruits and vegetables in baby foods, which were tested by the USDA for the first time this year.

The agency found traces of pesticide residues in baby foods containing green beans and pears. But the amounts were extremely small, and no baby food samples exceeded permissible levels of pesticides.

Despite the USDA results, the EWG shopper's guide urges consumers to buy organic fruits and vegetables, which generally have lower levels of pesticides, but are not necessarily pesticide-free, as we've reported before.

By eating organic products, consumers can lower their exposure to pesticides, the guide says.

That's a much more general and modest claim than the group made back in 2010, when it said consumers could reduce pesticide exposure by 80 percent if they avoided conventionally grown products on the "dirty dozen" list.

A 2011 study by two food scientists from the University of California, Davis found that swapping organics for conventional produce wouldn't make people any healthier.

The study, published in the *Journal of Toxicology*, also stated: "Our findings do not indicate that substituting organic forms of the 'Dirty Dozen' commodities for conventional forms will lead to any measurable consumer health benefit."

Regardless, says Alex Formuzis of the Environmental Working Group, "the people who consult our list are people who are committed to eating fruits and veggies, and would like to do so while reducing their pesticide intake." The guide gives them a way to "arm themselves with the information they need," he says.

EWG and the scientists do agree on one thing: No one should stop eating fruits and vegetables because of fears about pesticides.

produce apples pesticides