

Monterey County
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Empty foods for a 'Hay belly nation'

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Mum's the word among federal officials about the health benefits of eating organic foods.

The Department of Health and Human Services defers questions about organic foods to the Food and Drug Administration. But the FDA has no policy on organics because it says they're the domain of the Department of Agriculture, which will admit to using the "o-word," but says its mandate is simply to regulate use of the certified organic label, not to judge the relative benefits of organic versus conventional.

While the agencies pass the potato, a fast-growing body of scientific literature suggests that the connection between farm practices and the healthfulness of our foods merits attention. Organic foods don't always come out ahead of conventionally grown foods, but they rise to the top often enough to suggest that organic farming can increase, sometimes dramatically, the nutrient density of what we put in our mouths.

Researchers at the University of California-Davis found that 10-year mean levels of quercetin were 79 percent higher in organic tomatoes than in conventional tomatoes, and that levels of kaempferol were 97 percent higher. Quercetin and kaempferol are flavonoids that studies suggest protect against cardiovascular disease, cancer and other age-related ills.

A Spanish study measured 1.5 times more

carotenoids — associated with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and some cancers — in peppers grown organically.

Based on a review of data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Brian Halweil, senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute, says, "Thirty percent or more of the U.S. population ingests inadequate levels of magnesium, vitamin C, vitamin E and vitamin A, all nutrients we get from plants."

In a paper he published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Bruce Ames, professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of California-Berkeley, noted that vitamin and mineral deficiencies are common in the United States, and that these deficiencies may accelerate degenerative diseases.

Even our ever-expanding waistlines may be due in part to nutrient declines in our foods. Paul Hepperly, director of research at the Rodale Institute, thinks we may be responding like cattle do.

"Cattle will eat more of hay that's been rained on and had most of its nutrients leach out than they normally would," he says. "The animals get these big bellies, and they're unhealthy, but they're just trying to get their nutrients. Ranchers know that if they have animals with hay belly, they have poor quality food. What we've done with the erosion of nutrient content in our foods ... is that we have basically produced a hay belly nation."

Refusing to enter the discussion about how farming methods affect the nutrient density of our food helps our government duck the question of why it lends so much support to the status quo of conventional, nonorganic agriculture. But failing to acknowledge the connection between what happens on the farm and the healthfulness of foods may be enough to

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make a nation sick.

Deborah Rich grows olives in Monterey County. She wrote this for the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle in Salina, Kan.

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