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Debunking Agriculture Alarmism: Pesticides

Julie Gunlock | June 13, 2013





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My Facebook newsfeed lights up the same time each year with suggestions from many of my well-meaning (yet somewhat gullible) Facebook friends that they plan to protect their kids from scary pesticides by avoiding the "dirty dozen"—a list compiled by the junk science peddlers over at the Environmental Working Group (I refuse to link to their site. If you want to find them, just Google "crazy lying liars that make moms cry").

I've written before about the myth of the dirty dozen list as has IWF senior fellow Angela Logomasini, who recently wrote a scathing take down of the list at the Washington Times.

In a nutshell, the EWG claims the "dirty dozen" is made up of those fruits and vegetables that have the "most" pesticide residue. The organization releases an updated list each year so for a few weeks each spring, fear and panic ensues as apples, grapes and strawberries are crossed off the grocery list by terrified mothers heading to the supermarket.

There are a lot of things that bother me about this list—mainly that it's a lie. But what troubles me more is that these mothers simply don't understand that they are being used as pawns in an effort to damage the pesticide industry—and make no mistake, that's the goal, hurting industry, not protecting kids. Environmental groups capitalize on the understandable worries and guilt carried by all mothers. It's this guilt and constant worry that make mothers vulnerable to these dramatic, yet entirely false, claims of danger.

What mothers aren't often provided are facts. These environmental groups don't tell moms that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency conducts regular monitoring of fruits and vegetables that make it to market to ensure residues stay below tolerance levels. They don't mention that the U.S. Department of Agriculture advises consumers "overall pesticide residues found on foods tested are at levels below the tolerances established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and that overall pesticide residues found on baby food are lower than the levels found on other commodities."

And now, there's another reason to dismiss the "dirty dozen" list and yet another nugget of information that won't be reported by the EWG and other environmental organizations.

According to a new and very large, long term study funded by the UK's Health and Safety Executive—which is the UK's independent watchdog group for work-related health and safety issues agriculture workers who regularly worked with pesticides had lower than expected mortality from all causes, and in particular from all cancers combined.

Let's let that sink in for a moment...then repeat.

Those who had regular contact with pesticides had lower mortality from all cancers.

The study—called the Pesticide Users Health Study (PUHS)—was actually established to monitor the health of men and women who are certified to apply pesticides on a commercial basis under the UK's Control of Pesticides Regulations of 1986. The report provides an analysis of deaths occurring between 1987 and 2005 among members of the PUHS.

According to the study's key findings: Overall, men and women who participated in the PUHS had statistically significantly lower than expected mortality from all causes, all cancers combined, cancers of the lip, oral cavity and pharynx, of the digestive organs, and of the respiratory system, nonmalignant diseases of the nervous system and sense organs, and non-malignant diseases of the circulatory, respiratory and digestive systems, when compared with the GB population.

So, parents have a choice. They can believe the science fiction being peddled by the EWG—that the near-undetected levels of pesticide residue on the fruit you hand your kid (which is further diminished if you wash the fruit—which you should) is harmful and may cause cancer. Or, they can believe the massive, long term scientific study of agriculture workers who handle pesticides (up close and personal) which shows these folks actually live longer than the general population.

Which do you believe?

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