

Good health begins before birth with An organic diet

Obesity, diabetes, food allergies, autism, asthma and eczema – these are just a sample of health concerns on the rise amongst youth in Western countries.

Reportedly in the US, one in four children is now overweight or obese; the number of children and teenagers with Type 2 diabetes (once referred to as “adult-onset” diabetes) is rising sharply in line with obesity rates; and newly diagnosed eczema cases also increased 6.7-fold from 1977 to 2006.

In Australia, the news is almost as equally un-settling. In 2007, 23% of Australian children were classed as overweight or obese (2007 Australian National Children’s Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey). According to the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA), the rate of growth in numbers of overweight children doubled and obesity tripled in Australia between 1985 and 1995. Obese children in Australia have a 25% to 50% chance of becoming obese adults, increasing incidents of Type 2 diabetes and health problems in adulthood.

Anaphylaxis (severe allergic reactions) have also been on the rise in Australia since 1990. Perhaps of most concern is the fact that incidents of hospital admissions attributed to food-related anaphylaxis have increased most sharply in children under 5 years of age.

The big question is – why? Various theories have been examined to help try and understand modern health phenomena. Currently a concept simpler than most is gaining credibility amongst scientists and researchers: nutrition, coupled with food production. Answers derived from this line of questioning show that fresh produce produced without pesticides (i.e. organic) can give youth a healthier start to life – from well before the time they are born.

Dr. Charles Benbrook, chief scientist at the Organic Center, is author of the article ‘The Organic Factor – Tilting the Odds Toward Healthy Development’. He notes many scientists are beginning to suspect common health problems are connected to what we eat and are exposed to very early

in life in food, water, and air. He says exposure to pesticides is posing more and more of a proven risk.

“Food and beverages are the fuel for human growth from conception through adolescence, but they are also common carriers for chemicals and other contaminants, many of which can disrupt normal developmental patterns,” he says.

“The list of health problems for which pesticide exposure has emerged as a risk

factor overlaps almost perfectly with the list of health problems that have risen most sharply in the last decade.”

He says of particular interest in the debate is the idea that youth health issues can be traced back to changes in the diets of modern mothers – with the old adage ‘you are what you eat’ affecting babies even before they are born.

“The developmental or fetal origins of adult disease is one of the hottest areas of science today... A mother’s diet plays a major role in determining how many synthetic chemicals are present in amniotic fluids and whether the levels approach those capable of disrupting normal development by, for example, predisposing the child to diabetes or reproductive problems,” he says.

“The diet during pregnancy can also impact the “wiring” of the child’s satiety mechanism, which is the biochemical/neurological pathway in the body that transmits the crucial “I am getting full” signal to the brain. When this signal is weak or delayed, the stage is set for weight problems, diabetes and other chronic disease.”

Dr. Benbrook notes significant disruption of fetal development can also be a factor of what is known as ‘epigenetic changes’ – changes to the health trajectories of an individual which occur during embryo development without altering underlying DNA.

“Hence the label, “epi” (beyond)-“genetics”. Science has convincingly proven that in the case of epigenetics the timing of exposure is important – in some cases more important - than the (exposure) dose.”

He says organic farming dramatically lowers exposures to endocrine-disrupting chemicals that can trigger epigenetic changes that can result in developmental and/or disease problems later in life.

Links between exposure to pesticides and specific illnesses have also been established – for example autism. According to Dr. Benbrook a recent study found that mothers who used pet shampoos containing pesticides were twice as likely to give birth to children afflicted by autism.



“Dr. Benbrook says HFSC (high-fructose corn syrup)-sweetened drinks are among the most common snacks consumed by children between meals – a habit that can double the odds a child will be overweight.”

“Consider then how much more of a risk there may be when mothers actually ingest these same pesticides,” he reflects.

Yet another study found children whose mothers were exposed to hexachlorobenzene (a fungicide) during pregnancy had a higher risk of being overweight at 6 years of age.

Dr. Benbrook says further research from the Organic Center has helped show a well-balanced diet composed of organic fruits, vegetables, dairy and grain products can lay the foundation for a healthier future by largely eliminating dietary exposures to pesticides, and laying the groundwork for normal endocrine regulation of blood sugars, energy intake and immune system functions.

However he notes it is still critical children maintain a clean and healthy diet once born, with plenty of evidence that food eaten in the early years of childhood makes a life-long difference to health.

According to the 20th Australian Total Diet Survey (2003), dietary exposure to pesticide residues is highest for the toddler age group and Dr. Benbrook notes the average child in America is exposed to 10 to 13 pesticides daily through food and beverages.

“Fresh fruits and vegetables, and juices account for nearly half of these exposures.

Milk contributes two to three additional residues and drinking water another three. Exposures are clearly happening, which leads to the question - how risky are these residues?”

He says pesticides like organophosphate (OP) pesticides are among a new group of environmental contaminants called “obesogens”, a class of chemicals known to predispose an organism toward excessive weight gain.

Another issue is processed food ingredients, with research showing some artificial food colourings, preservatives, and high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) make weight difficult to manage. Dr. Benbrook says HFSC-sweetened drinks are among the most common snacks consumed by children between meals – a habit that can double the odds a child will be overweight.

Dr. Benbrook says research has shown a nutritious organic diet can help teach children what ‘not to eat’ by both avoiding chemicals like obesogens, and also by establishing taste-based preferences in the child for familiar nutrient-dense and flavourful foods.

“Organic foods (also) deliver higher daily intakes of health-promoting phytochemicals that reinforce the body’s defense and repair mechanisms, and help maintain blood sugars within healthy ranges.”

He says this comes back to the way organic food is farmed.

“The nitrogen cycle on organic farms is rooted in substantially more complex biological processes and soil-plant interactions, and for this reason, organic farming offers great promise in consistently producing nutrient-enriched foods.”

But he says when it comes to delivering health benefits on-the-table, the bulk of the responsibility falls on individuals – particularly parents.

“(Parents) need to think deeply and strategically about what they feed themselves and their families in order to tip the odds in favor of healthy development and lifelong health.”

For further links to research contact the BFA office Ph: (07) 3350 5716 ext. 222 / www.bfa.com.au.



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