

Hot topic

# Help our kids with organics

By JAMES MELDRUM

As childhood obesity levels in Australia rise dangerously, it is not surprising that public debate over the nutritional value of the food our children eat has reached an all-time high.

Too many children have diets consisting of too few essential vitamins and minerals, and often too much fat, salt, sugar and artificial additives.

Evidence suggests obesity makes young children and adolescents more susceptible later in life to conditions such as high blood pressure, asthma, heart disease, diabetes, hyperactivity, infertility and even some kinds of cancer.

But the risks are not just restricted to physiology. Obesity can create image problems for kids resulting in anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

We all want our kids to eat well. Giving them a diet of organic foods is one of the best ways to ensure a healthier start in life. Why is organic better for our kids?

An article published in *Coronary and Diabetic Care in the UK 2004* by the Association of Primary Care Groups and Trusts (*Soil Association, 2004*) concluded that a mainly organic diet:

- reduces the amount of toxic chemicals ingested;
- totally avoids genetically modified organisms (GMO);
- reduces the amount of food additives and colourings;
- increases the amount of beneficial vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids (EFA) and antioxidants consumed; and
- appears able to lower the incidence of common conditions such as cancer, coronary heart disease, allergies and hyperactivity in children.

## PESTICIDE EFFECTS

Industrial agriculture practices are a relatively modern invention. Before the 20th century, most food was produced without artificial growth hormones, antibiotics or chemical pesticides.

We are now beginning to question, scientifically and ethically, the impact of these methods on ourselves and our children. Children are at greater risk from pesticide residues for two reasons.

First, they ingest more food and water per unit of body weight than adults, so exposure is greater in proportion to their size. Second, they are still developing organ systems, so their immature bodies may have limited ability to detoxify these residues.

A recent study by the University of Washington and the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention tested the urine of 23 elementary school-aged children in Seattle over a 15-day period.

Researchers found average levels of pesticides in the children "decreased to the non-detect levels immediately after the introduction of organic diets and remained non-detectable until the conventional diets were reintroduced" (*LA Times, 2005*).

In conclusion, the study found that by switching to organic food, parents could provide their children with "dramatic and immediate" protection from a variety of widely used pesticides.

## GMO RISKS

GMOs are banned from organic food. Unfortunately, many American families eat genetically modified (GM) food every day, most unknowingly. Studies suggest as much as 80% of processed foods in the US contain a component from a GM crop, such as corn starch, high-fructose corn syrup, canola oil, soybean oil, soy flour, lecithin or cotton-seed oil (Food Policy Institute, 2005).

Because children convert more of their food into body-building material, the potential risks of GM food may be much higher for them. Smith (2005) claims "kids in the US are regularly fed GM soy-based infant formula."

The digestive capacity of small children is less than adults, suggesting more GM DNA might survive, with more trans-genes ending up inside gut bacteria or possibly inside organs. But as very little is done to monitor the impact of GM food consumption on humans, it may take years (or even decades) for health problems to emerge.

One of the best ways to avoid the uncertain risks of GM for our children and ourselves is by switching to organic food. Thousands of schools around the world, particularly in Europe, have decided not to let their kids be used as guinea pigs and have banned GM foods completely (Smith, 2005).

## FOOD ADDITIVE PROBLEMS

Food additives are often used in conventional foods to improve colouring, taste, texture, smell and appearance. They are also used to stabilise product processing and extend shelf-life.

But food additives, colourings and preservatives can cause a range of health problems in children. According to the Soil Association (2004), tartrazine (the yellow food colouring E102) and other additives have been linked to allergic reactions, headaches, asthma, growth retardation and hyperactivity in kids.

And the US Agency for Toxic Substances has warned that children with asthma or other respiratory problems may suffer asthma attacks or breathing difficulties if they eat foods preserved with sulphur dioxide or other sulphur-based preservatives.

In a recent study for the Soil Association (UK), Shane Heaton found more than 500 food additives are permitted for use in non-organic processed foods whereas organic food products exclude the use of hydrogenated fats (also known as trans-fats), phosphoric acid, aspartame, monosodium glutamate (MSG) and sulphur dioxide.

Comparatively, about 30 are permitted in organic food processing and only if "the product cannot be produced or preserved without them".

Indeed, Heaton found that hydrogenated fats (used in many non-organic processed foods such as biscuits, margarine and snack foods) have been directly linked to increased rates of heart disease and cancer.

In response to the growing concern over hydrogenated fats, the two largest organic and natural supermarket chains in America – Whole Foods Market and Wild Oats – have removed all products containing hydrogenated oils (trans-fats) from their shelves, thus helping parents choosing healthier foods.

## NUTRIENTS

There is growing evidence that organic food generally contains more nutrients than non-organic food. Again, we are indebted to Heaton's comprehensive review of many research studies analysing the nutrient content of organic and conventional food.

The review found that on average, organic food contains higher levels of vitamin C and essential minerals. According to a group of Welsh researchers, organic milk contains 64% more omega 3 fatty acids.

The group found that behavioural problems may improve if parents switch their children to organic milk, and that organic milk (compared to non-organic milk) may also reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease (Medical News, 2004).

Clearly, choosing organic foods can make a lifetime of difference for our kids.

Yes, organic foods are generally more expensive than non-organic alternatives and can stretch family shopping budgets. But when we think about what future health problems our kids may experience caused by poor diets, steering them onto a path of nutritious, healthy eating (primarily organic) may be the most important legacy parents can give their children.

In the next issue of the Journal, we'll take a closer look at the important role of school canteens in developing healthier eating habits and how organic food should be part of every canteen menu. ■

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# Whole Kids snacks launched

At the inaugural Organic Expo in Sydney in July, Nourish successfully launched Whole Kids, Australia's first range of certified organic food just for kids.

While working in the health industry giving advice on nutrition and exercise to new mothers and parents, Monica Waters saw clients

having a growing concern for the health of their children and the lack of nutritious snack alternatives.

Waters says: "I lost count of how many mums and dads, and even grandparents, who told me they'd prefer to give their kids healthier and more natural snacks if only there were real alternatives available."

Together with husband James Meldrum, the couple established their own business, Nourish, with the commitment to provide the highest-quality organic and natural foods. Over the next four years, they researched the market for organic kids' food by visiting overseas food expos, talking with children and parents, developing new products and analysing the nutritional properties of conventional snack foods.

"We were surprised at just how many con-

ventional snacks for kids had high levels of sugar and fat, or contained preservatives, colours, flavours, or other harmful additives," Meldrum says.

They created a range of fully certified organic snack foods for kids that includes sultana snack packs, fruit-filled bars, popcorn and juices. The range is continually expanding, with many new products due for launch over the next six to 12 months.

The colourful Whole Kids stand at the Organic Expo generated a lot of excitement from visitors and trade. Waters and Meldrum report that the response was overwhelming, with most parents agreeing it was about time someone provided healthy organic snacks for kids.

Nourish has been approached by a number of schools keen to stock Whole Kids for their canteens.

The owners are assessing export market opportunities generated from inquiries by international trade visitors to the Expo.

The Whole Kids range is available from Macro Wholefoods and leading organic and health-food stores. Contact: web <[www.nourish.net.au](http://www.nourish.net.au)>.



James Meldrum and Monica Waters