

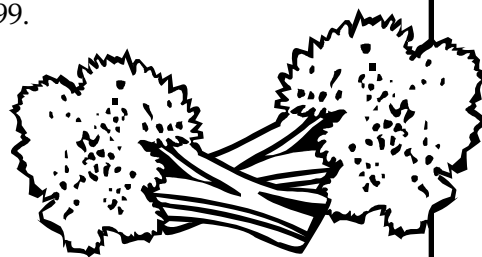


On March 8, 1999, the Council of the **Society of Toxicology** wrote a letter critiquing a Consumers Union report, "Do you know what you are eating? An analysis of U.S. Government data on pesticide residues in foods," February 1999. On June 21, 1999, the letter was followed by a detailed analysis by SOT Council of the flawed methodology used by Consumers Union. The Consumers Union

report is based upon their term the "toxicity index," which was calculated for individual fruits and vegetables. SOT Council concludes that the methodology is scientifically invalid. We are pleased to share Dana Joel Gattuso's editorial, "Forget pesticides, eat your vegetables," *Detroit News*, December 23, 1999, which briefly highlights SOT's efforts.

Reprinted with permission from the *Detroit News*, December 23, 1999.

Forget pesticides, eat your vegetables



By Dana Joel Gattuso

With the holidays upon us, food is on everyone's mind. And while we'd rather focus on ginger breads and pumpkin pie, we shouldn't ignore the healthy foods. So here's a question to test your IQ on healthy food consumption habits: Eating fruits and vegetables that have been sprayed with pesticides is likely to

- a) *reduce your risk of cancer.*
- b) *increase your risk of cancer.*

If you chose "a," you are correct. Pesticide residues are so small and consumed in such tiny portions that there is no appreciable risk.

In fact, your chances of getting cancer actually rise by not eating fruits and vegetables. Scientists have estimated that individuals who do not eat a sufficient amount of plant-based foods as much as double their risk of cancer. The National Cancer Institute and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services advise us to eat five or more servings a day.

If you chose "b," however, you are not alone. As many as 77 percent of adults, according to a recent survey sponsored by the American Institute for Cancer Research, erroneously believe that eating fruits and vegetables sprayed with pesticides increases your chances of cancer.

While this misunderstanding is alarming, it is not surprising. The public is being fed inaccuracies in heaps by a number of vocal, special-interest environmental groups, such as the Consumers Union and the Environmental Working Group. These groups want pesticides and other synthetic chemicals banned from production, and they manipulate the facts in aggressive media campaigns to scare consumers away from foods containing pesticides.

One egregious example is the Consumers Union's report last February warning parents to avoid feeding their children certain fruits and vegetables that the group determined contain high toxicity levels due to pesticide residues.

(The Consumers Union, you may recall, is the organization that started the Alar apple frenzy 10 years ago, prompting many schools to yank apples that were perfectly safe from their lunch programs.) The Consumers Union's updated list of taboo produce includes fresh peaches, apples, pears, spinach, and green beans.

Written up in the union's publication, *Consumer Reports*, one of the nation's most popular and well-read magazines, the article reached thousands of readers. The story was further publicized through television news programs, newspapers, 60 Minutes and other media coverage.

But what didn't get much media coverage were statements released by toxicologists and other scientists testifying that the Consumers Union was needlessly frightening consumers by using faulty science. The Society of Toxicology, the largest organization of professional toxicologists in the world, wrote in a letter to the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Carol Browner, that the Consumers Union's "methodology used to calculate the Toxicity Index does not reflect the standard approaches used for toxicological risk assessments and that it is scientifically flawed." The group urged Browner to assure the general public that there is no danger in eating pesticide-protected produce and that these foods are a vital part of our diet.

Similarly, Dr. Bruce Ames, a member of the National Academy of Sciences and a biochemist who directs the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Center at the

University of California at Berkeley, told the Associated Press that the findings of the report are "nonsense" and that focusing on "minuscule" levels of pesticide residues "is a distraction from something far more important — feeding kids fruits and vegetables that prevent cancer and other diseases."

This is the heart of the matter. These groups fail to consider the risks from eliminating pesticides. As it is, Americans simply don't eat enough fruits and vegetables to protect themselves from cancer risks. Among children and teenagers, eight out of 10 do not eat the recommended portion of five fruits and vegetables a day.

Pesticides are essential. They are the most effective device we have to protect crops from insects, plant-killing weeds, and plant disease. And as scientists from the National Cancer Institute projected on the potential effects of banning pesticides: "Prices would rise and demand could fall for foods that have been shown to prevent cancer, such as broccoli and carrots."

So keep a clear head the next time you hear reports warning you to avoid apples, pears, and green beans. And as you head for the Christmas cookies, bread pudding, and eggnog this season, be sure to make a stop at the veggie & dip platter.

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This article and accompanying documents may be viewed on the SOT Web site (www.toxicology.org) under "News and Information," then "Recent Articles."

Related URLs

SOT Council's Letter to EPA: Consumers Union's Report on Pesticide Residues
<http://www.toxicology.org/President's%20Section/CURep.pdf>

SOT Council's Follow-Up Letter to EPA on Consumers Union's Report
<http://www.toxicology.org/President's%20Section/CURep2.pdf>

SOT Council's Evaluation of Consumers Union's Toxicity Index
<http://www.toxicology.org/President's%20Section/CUIndex.pdf>

"Do you know what you are eating? An analysis of U.S. Government data on pesticide residues in foods," Consumers Union, February 1999.
http://www.consumersunion.org/food/do_you_know1.htm