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Organic food 'no benefit to health'

Eating fruit and veg is more important than whether produce is 'green', says expert

Jo Revill, Whitehall editor
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Parents who want their children to eat healthily should focus more on serving them extra fruit and vegetables and less on giving them expensive organic produce, according to one of the country's leading nutrition experts.

Lord Krebs, former head of the Food Standards Agency, said families were becoming 'deeply confused' by conflicting messages about healthy eating.

The market for organic food reached more than £2bn last year, with most consumers from households with children under the age of 15. An average of £37m is spent each week on organic produce, mostly in south-east England.

The agency is reviewing all the evidence on nutritional differences between organic and non-organic food to see if it needs to alter its recommendations to consumers; at present, these are that there is no safety or health reason for switching to organic. Two recent studies suggesting that there may be benefits to eating organic tomatoes and drinking organic milk have prompted a fresh look at the evidence.

However, according to Krebs, an eminent scientist and principal of Jesus College, Oxford, there is still no reliable, peer-reviewed evidence to show that there is any clear health benefit to eating this 'green' produce.

'The organic message can sometimes be a distortion from the more important messages,' said Krebs. 'If a parent is asking, "how can I improve the health of my children?" they may think, "Oh, I can give them organic food". But that is far less important than the decision to feed them more fruit and vegetables, or the decision to give them less salt.' His concerns about the claims made for organic produce were that 'they add to the mix of confusion in people's minds about what it means to eat healthily'.

When Krebs chaired the agency, he came under pressure to validate claims that organic food was better for people - but refused to endorse the produce.

However, the Soil Association still maintains that organic food is better for health.

A spokeswoman said: 'There is now a rapidly growing body of evidence which shows significant differences between the nutritional composition of organic and non-organic food. Studies have shown that on average organic food has higher levels of iron, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and vitamin C.'

A European Union-funded project, involving 33 academic centres across Europe and led by Newcastle University, is now investigating the nature of produce from organic and non-organic farming techniques.

According to the Soil Association, one conclusion is clear: 'Organically produced crops and dairy milk usually contain more beneficial compounds such as vitamins and antioxidants,' said the spokeswoman.

'The research has shown up to 40 per cent more beneficial compounds in vegetable crops and up to 90 per cent more in milk.' But Krebs said: 'I think protecting consumers is about telling them the honest truth so that they can make up their own mind, informed by impartial evidence.'

A spokesperson for the agency said: 'The weight of current scientific evidence does not support claims that organic food is more nutritious or safer than conventionally produced food. However, a number of new studies have recently emerged focusing on nutritional differences between organic and non-organic food.'

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