



**Facts, Not Fears:  
Reassuring  
Consumers  
About the Safety  
of All Produce**

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# FACTS, NOT FEARS: REASSURING CONSUMERS ABOUT THE SAFETY OF ALL PRODUCE

## Safety Fears: A New Barrier to Consumption

According to the Centers for Disease Control, only one in 10 Americans consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables each day. Since decades of scientific studies have proven that a plant-rich diet prevents diseases, like heart disease, stroke, certain cancers and diabetes, promoting adequate consumption is an important public health initiative. An example of the disease-fighting characteristics of produce, a [peer reviewed](#) analysis published in the journal *Food and Chemical Toxicology* determined that if half of all Americans increased their consumption of fruit and vegetables by a single serving per day, 20,000 cancer cases could be prevented each year.

While there are many reasons cited for lack of consumption, peer reviewed studies are beginning to show that safety fears about produce among consumers may be a newly identified barrier to eating more fruits and veggies. Unfortunately, these safety fears are often unfounded and inaccurate. However, the cumulative result may be a negative impact on consumption of all produce — organic and conventionally grown.

## The Studies

In a [peer reviewed study published in September 2016](#), researchers at the Illinois Institute of Technology's (IIT) Center for Nutrition Research surveyed 510 low income consumers in the greater Chicago area to learn more about what terms and information about fruits and vegetables may influence their shopping intentions. Among the key findings, messaging which claims certain fruits and vegetables have “higher” pesticide residues results in low income shoppers reporting that they would be less likely to purchase **any** fruits and vegetables — organic or conventional.

“We were surprised to see how informational content that named specific fruits and vegetables as having the highest pesticide residues increased the percentage of shoppers who said they would be unlikely to purchase any type of fruits and vegetables,” says Dr. Britt Burton-Freeman, Lead Author and Associate Professor of Food Science and Nutrition, IIT's Center for Nutrition Research. “The concern is that depending on the structure of the communication about pesticides and fruits and vegetables this could turn people away from wanting to purchase any fresh produce.”

Researchers at the John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future conducted a similar [study](#) which was published in the journal *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment* in January 2015.

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These researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with study participants in the Baltimore area to learn more about the way food is understood within consumers' definitions of healthy. The researchers stated that they explored this topic among consumers living in an underserved, low-income neighborhood because "this group is particularly important demographically given the disparate burden of diet-related diseases they carry and the frequency of diet-related messages they receive."

Specific to produce and pesticide residues, the researchers included the following excerpt in their paper:

*"Some participants acknowledged that they hear competing health messages about foods which might conflict with other health benefits of the food, such as nutritional value. One participant described health messages about the importance of eating apples being contradicted by other messages warning of the effects of pesticides"*

Among the John Hopkins study conclusions: "Perceiving that there is an overwhelming amount of sometimes contradictory information about healthy eating could make some consumers defeatist about trying to eat healthily. Given the potential implications of competing messages about healthy eating, it is important that those who want to improve food production techniques and those who want to improve nutrition cooperate to create consistent messaging about healthy eating."

## Facts and Science That Reassures Consumers:

Based upon these study findings and the recommendation to create consistent messaging about healthy eating, the Alliance for Food and Farming (AFF) set out to find science-based information and facts that would reassure consumers about produce safety and help remove fear as a barrier to consumption. The AFF went to the source – consumers – and asked them what information they would find helpful when they are purchasing fruits and vegetables.<sup>1</sup>

Here is what was learned:

Almost 90% of consumers responded favorably to nutrition facts and said it raised their confidence concerning produce safety. Among the most reassuring information: *"Decades of nutritional research shows that increasing consumption of conventional and organic produce can improve health and prevent diseases. Not only are conventionally and organically grown fruits and vegetables safe and nutritious, Americans should be consuming more of both to reduce their risk of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and obesity."*

Washing information raised confidence in produce safety for 87% of consumers: *"According to the federal Food and Drug Administration, washing fresh produce before eating is a healthful habit. You can reduce and often eliminate pesticide residues if they are present on fresh produce by washing them with cold or warm tap water."*

Eighty-Six percent of consumers said the simple statement, *"Health experts and scientists say produce, grown either conventionally or organically, is safe to eat for you and your children,"* raised their confidence in the safety of all produce.

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<sup>1</sup>Alliance for Food and Farming: Identification of Facts and Information that Reassure Consumers About Produce Safety. Nationwide Online Survey. September 2016. Margin of Error +/- 3.5.



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Science and facts regarding residues and toxicology also increased confidence and reassured approximately 80% of consumers about the safety of all produce. This science-based information included:

- *The United States Department of Agriculture conducts a program that analyzes pesticide residues on foods. Almost half of the foods tested by USDA had no detectable levels of pesticide residues. When USDA did find the presence of pesticide residues on food products, 99.8% of those residues were below the levels considered safe by the Environmental Protection Agency.*
- *Analyses by toxicologists found that a child could eat hundreds to thousands of servings of a fruit or vegetable in a day and still not have any effects from pesticide residues.*
- *If present at all, pesticide residues on fruits and vegetables are significantly below levels considered safe by health and regulatory agencies.*

The AFF also asked consumers what regulations reassure them about the safety of organic produce specifically. Again, over 80% of consumers said their confidence in produce safety increased upon reading this information:

- *All fruits and vegetables sold in the U.S. are subject to the most stringent regulations in the world to ensure safety. Organic fruits and vegetables are subject to additional laws and organic farmers must submit to an independent audit of their farming operations to ensure established growing practices are being followed.*

- *In order to control pests and diseases, certified organic farmers may use fertilizers and pesticides, but they are mostly derived from natural sources and must be approved by the USDA Organic Program.*

When all facts and information were presented at one time to consumers, it resulted in favorable opinions and confidence in produce safety increasing significantly. After reading the facts and information, 80% of consumers stated that they were confident in the safety of conventional produce and 87% of consumers said they were confident in the safety of organic produce.

### **Conclusion:**

Fear can and should be removed as a potential barrier to consumption. Sharing accurate, science based information with consumers that provides reassurance about produce safety and communicates the benefits of increased produce consumption is critical to the long-term health of families across the country. The research shows that the information shared by the AFF with consumers made a positive difference in their perception of the safety of all produce and helps alleviate fear as a potential barrier to consumption.

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