

Milk: Buyers (and cows) beware

Consumers are often led to think organic milk is better or safer than conventional milk, but the truth is quite different.

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MILK is probably the purest, most wholesome, safest, highly regulated, inspected and most carefully handled food that any of us consume.

Last year, U.S. consumers spent \$90 billion on dairy products. Organic fluid milk was only 2% of the fluid milk market and was priced significantly higher than conventional milk.

Organic milk and milk produced with no recombinant bovine somatotropin ("rbST-free") are routinely advertised as being somehow healthier, less risky, more environmentally friendly and produced by "happier" cows than conventional milk. Consumers are led to believe that organic milk is better or that rbST-free milk is safer.

The truth is quite different, but behind these claims are very powerful corporate interests that know they can sell the same product at a higher price if they can create doubt or spread fear about conventional milk.

Hormones

Recently, more than 200 different samples of retail milk of all types were purchased in stores from across the nation. In this study, conventional milk, rbST-free milk and organic milk were tested by audited procedures.

Within milk fat categories (skim, 1%, 2%, etc.), all samples had the same nutrient content. All had the same levels of the hormones estrogen, insulin-like

growth factor-1 (IGF-1) and all forms of bST. None contained antibiotics.

It is easy to scare people by using the word "hormone," but all milk contains hormones and always has. Milk contains progesterone and estrogen, which are steroid hormones. The levels of these hormones are the same in whichever milk you drink, and their presence poses no health risk to humans.

Vitamin D is a steroid hormone and is added to milk. Milk also contains protein hormones, such as bovine somatotropin (bST, also called bovine growth hormone) and IGF-1. Both are present in tiny quantities in milk, are digested just like any other protein you eat (steak or tofu) and have no effect in people when eaten.

Specifically, the level of bST in milk we consume is the same from all types of dairies, whether they use rbST to increase production or not.

The anti-bST campaign is particularly deceptive. bST has been used in cows for more than a decade, and there has been no indication of any impact of its use on the milk produced or the health of people who consume the milk.

Every major credible health organization around the world that has looked at the issues of bST and food safety — including the American Medical Assn., American Pediatrics Assn., Health Canada, European Commission and Food & Drug Administration — has agreed that milk from rbST-treated cows is the same as any other milk.

Oft-repeated smear campaigns can, however, gradually shape the public's perceptions, and major food corporations understand the power of fear in selling food.

Huge corporate interests can increase their profits if people fear conventional milk. They can make more money selling rbST-free milk at \$4/gal. or organic milk at \$6/gal. (or more) than by selling conventional milk at \$3/gal.

Support of organic or rbST-free milk products may stem from concern about the environment, but the science does not support those positions.

Cows given rbST produce more milk. In doing so, their production efficiency increases, and they eat less feed for each gallon of milk they produce. In fact, it takes about 6-8% less land to produce milk from cows given rbST — less of all of the inputs that go into producing dairy products.

These cows release less greenhouse gas into the environment, reducing their impact on global warming.



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In fact, a recent British government study of organic farming found that in many cases, organic farming was less environmentally friendly than conventional agricultural practices. This was particularly true for milk production. The report concluded, in part, that organic milk requires 80% more land per gallon of milk produced, generates 20% more carbon dioxide and produces almost double the amount of other byproducts that can lead to acidification of soil and water pollution.

Antibiotics

What of the claims that organic farms use no antibiotics? Avoiding antibiotics might sound like a good idea, unless you happen to be a sick cow.

Conventional farms use antibiotics on a milking cow only if the cow is sick with a serious and treatable bacterial disease. All dairy producers avoid using antibiotics, when possible, to avoid having to throw away the cow's milk

while the cow is on treatment. Milk from treated cows is discarded both during and for a prescribed number of days after treatment to ensure that antibiotics do not get into the milk supply.

Every shipment of milk from every dairy is tested for major antibiotics before that milk is allowed into the human food system. The milk you buy at the store does not have antibiotics in it, regardless of the type of dairy from which it came. Labels that imply otherwise are deceptive and are used to create consumer mistrust and to sell more expensive alternatives.

Are cows on organic farms "happier" or healthier? If a cow on an organic dairy needs to be treated for a bacterial disease (infection in her udder or uterus after calving, pneumonia, etc.), the organic rules say she must be treated and that she can *never* again be used to produce organic milk.

A new dairy cow costs about \$2,000. Treating her properly when she is sick on an organic dairy is a major loss. The truth

is that some sick cows on organic dairies are left to fend for themselves without treatment, or treatment is delayed until such a time that its effectiveness becomes questionable.

Many who pay high prices for organic or rbST-free milk do so out of a combination of manipulated fear and/or a genuine concern for the safety of milk, protection of the environment and welfare of the cow. At best, they have been misinformed.

All milk is what it always has been: a wholesome, safe, nutritious product produced by family-owned dairies that care about their cows, their land and the quality of the product they sell.

Editor's Note: These comments have the support of more than 65 academic scientists in animal science and veterinary medicine who urge consumers to make informed, science-based decisions when purchasing milk. The complete list and longer article can be found at www.Feedstuffs.com or www.FeedstuffsFoodLink.com.