

Organic Food Is a ‘Human Right’, Says Leading Food Scientist

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

Global Research, September 28, 2020

[New Internationalist](#) 23 September 2020

To stamp out pesticides from our fragile food systems is to protect those most prone to ill health, Friends of the Earth’s senior staff scientist, Kendra Klein explains to Yasmin Dahnoun.

From seed to harvest, the food that arrives on our plates is far from its natural form. Whilst the majority of the population trust in farmers, supply chains and environmental regulations, we are often exposed to a toxic concoction of chemicals. This has the potential to affect our mood, health and bodily functions to a far greater extent than ever imagined.

In an interview with Kendra Klein, a senior scientist from Friends of the Earth US, Klein reveals how even the smallest of exposures to pesticides matter and how switching to an organic diet can dramatically decrease the pesticide build-up in our bodies by around 70 per cent in just six days.

Yasmin Dahnoun: How did you become involved in the field of organic farming?

Kendra Klein: My mother had breast cancer when I was a young girl and again while I was at college, and that has really shaped my interest in the connection between our health, the environment and toxic exposures. My work at [Friends of the Earth](#) brings together my background in both public health and organic agriculture.

I am not just working on what the problem is and talking about cancer and other health problems linked to toxic exposures. I am talking about the solution and where we need to go, and this allows me to remain hopeful.

YD: It’s often argued that our exposure to pesticides from food is so minimal it won’t affect our health. Would you disagree?

KK: Yes, there are a number of reasons why. At different points in our lives we’re more vulnerable to toxic exposures, and that’s in utero, childhood and adolescence when our bodies are rapidly developing. At those points of development very small exposures can actually lead to lifelong problems. These factors are often not accounted for by safety regulations because they are set for a healthy adult eater.

Regulations for ‘safe’ levels of exposure are also set chemical-by-chemical, as if we’re not exposed to a toxic soup of pesticides and other industrial chemicals every day. We know exposure to multiple pesticides can amplify the negative impacts of each one. Another

reason why we are concerned about small exposures is the science on endocrine disruptors – chemicals that can mimic, block or scramble the hormone messages of our body.

Endocrine disruptors can increase our risk of cancers, reproductive problems, neurological problems, obesity, diabetes and many other negative health outcomes. Over 50 pesticides, including glyphosate and all of the pesticides we tested in our [organic diet studies](#) are associated with endocrine disruption. It only takes a small amount of pesticide exposure to impact health in this way.

YD: Are we just exposed through our food?

KK: Food is not the only way we are exposed. Pesticides such as Roundup (aka glyphosate) are used in city parks, playgrounds, and in homes. The families we tested were not using pesticides in their homes, we ensured that, but people who are using insecticides and herbicides in their gardens would be exposed. So that's one reason why shifting your diet to organic is not going to completely eliminate your exposure.

YD: Your study found that switching to an organic diet is effective in eliminating toxic chemical build-up, how does this affect families who can't afford organic foods?

KK: We found families that didn't eat organically and tested them for six days on their typical diets and then we tested them while switching out their diets for completely organic food for six days. What we found was that in six days, every pesticide we tested for, dropped.

Glyphosate dropped 70 per cent on average. And some other compounds for another cancer-causing pesticide called malathion dropped by 95 per cent. So that's great news, it means we can quickly get rid of much of our pesticide body burden by switching to an organic diet. But the bad news is that we are all being exposed to pesticides through the food we eat because it's not common that we're eating 100 per cent organic and most people can't do that.

YD: So this raises the question: why are pesticides are still used in our food?

KK: That is the fundamental question about industrial agricultural systems. In the past three of four decades, the use of toxic pesticides have increased despite having a growing body of scientific evidence telling us how harmful these chemicals are.

Glyphosate was flagged as a probable human carcinogen in 1983 by the US Environmental Protection Agency, yet the agency has allowed an ever-increasing use of it since then.

This history has come to light recently as a result of very high-profile court cases against Monsanto, linking people's non-Hodgkin lymphoma (a type of blood cancer) to exposure with glyphosate. Pesticide applicators, farmers, farm workers, some homeowners and home gardeners who are consistently using these products are ending up with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

The three cases that came out of the court were decided in favour of the plaintiffs with high settlements.

The case gave an insight into the decades-long efforts of Monsanto to ensure this toxic

product stayed on the market.

A multi-channel effort was made, both through influencing the science and the public narrative and through direct lobbying of legislators who had connections with regulatory agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

YD: How are large corporations, such as Monsanto (now owned by Bayer), able to sway public opinion?

KK: By producing ghost-written science and trying to influence the scientific literature. And through attacking researchers who are putting out good science critiquing their products and through covert public relations campaigns.

A number of reporters have done a good job of digging into that and uncovering the truth. Why do we have common use of toxic pesticides? It's because of the power of the pesticide industry. This is not an isolated case, glyphosate is really indicative of a systematic failure that has allowed these companies to influence regulatory processes to benefit their own bottom line at the expense of our health.

YD: The government are not keeping regulations up to date of the science. You must feel extremely frustrated.

KK: Yes. We are working on science-based environmental and health efforts, but there is such a huge disconnect between the science and our regulations. We know this with climate change, we know this with other toxic chemical exposures. We know this with tobacco use and lung cancer. This is an old story. There is an excellent report that came out of the EU called [Late lessons from early warnings](#) that compiles a whole set of stories where the science was indicating harm but regulators didn't act.

I think that it's important to understand that we keep repeating this same failure. Where science is indicating harm, we wait for the body count to rise before regulators are compelled to act. I do take some small hope from the story of big tobacco. Despite it being a decades-long effort, we have made some real success in curbing use. And maybe decades from now we will be able to celebrate some big wins on pesticides.

YD: Organic food is often seen as a shopping preference, what are the human rights implications of this perspective?

KK: The UN rapporteur on food released [a report](#) a few years ago on the freedom from pesticides exposure as a human rights issue all throughout the supply chain. Farmers and farm workers are on the frontline of exposure. Farm workers are vulnerable because they don't have decision making power over what pesticides are being used and often don't know what they are being exposed to.

When we talk about getting pesticides out of the food system, we are talking about protecting those who are on the frontlines and suffering higher rates of cancer, asthma, birth defects, Parkinson's disease, all sorts of health problems. And when we move through the food chain and we think about eaters and think about people who don't have access to organic food, that's a human rights issue.

We think about organic food as if it's a shopping preference, and it has this tarnish of elitism, because it often is more expensive. But really, it's a public good. This is about

protecting the entire public from exposure to pesticides that we know are harmful to our health.

YD: Many people would argue that we need mass farming and pesticides in order to feed the growing world population, what would you say to this?

KK: The myth that we need pesticides to feed the world, is a very purposefully perpetuated myth promoted by the pesticide industry. This is part of what has been uncovered in these Monsanto documents and other investigative research that our colleagues have done. It is so perverse because the opposite is true.

The current system is sawing off the branch we're sitting on by destroying the biodiversity, soil, water and climate we need to keep growing food. If we want to continue feeding all people, we will need to rapidly shift from a pesticide-intensive system to an organic system and that is a major paradigm shift. We will need to think differently about what is good agriculture.

The entire idea of industrialized countries feeding the world is a myth – it is predominately small farmers around the world who are feeding themselves and their communities. I think on so many fronts we need a paradigm shift to an ecological system, that is so clear in agriculture. Expert report after expert report comes to the same conclusion that we need a shift towards agro-ecological farming.

YD: It seems like agriculture is in a very dire situation, what's the good news?

KK: The really good news is that we know how to shift to organic farming. There is a growing market for organic food and farmers are transitioning to organic production. We can take hope in knowing that we actually already have the solution. We just need to grow it. And that's where public information comes in because when we understand that this is a human right, we can engage far more people in working to create the policies that we need.

No one is going to fight for a luxury good. So, when we change our understanding of what organic food is, from a shopping preference to a public good, we realize that actually, this is a place where we need to be putting more energy.

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