

Viewpoint: Pesticide residues on food could be 100,000 times higher—and still wouldn't harm your health

The idea that “nonorganic” produce, typically referred to as “conventional” produce, is unsafe to eat is pervasive, and it largely hinges on a narrow definition of “safe” (i.e., pesticide-free) as well as a black-and-white view of what goes into the production of organic and conventional crops.

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What do we mean when we say “safe”?

Many substances are safe unless they are used excessively. Alcohol is a toxin, but it's not a problem for most people if consumed in moderation

“The first principle of toxicology is ‘the dose makes the poison,’” said Carl Winter, who was a food toxicologist at University of California Cooperative Extension for 32 years “It is the amount of exposure to a chemical, not its presence or absence, that determines the potential for harm. In the case of pesticide residues, the levels are typically far lower than those required to produce harm.”

[In September], the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued its annual Pesticide Residue Monitoring Program Report for 2018 Of the 1,448 samples produced or grown in the U.S., 96.8% were in compliance and 47.1% had no detectable residues.

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“If consumers were exposed to 100,000 times more pesticide residue than they are typically exposed to on a daily basis throughout their lifetimes,” Winter said, “their levels of exposure would still be lower than levels that don't even produce any noticeable toxicological effect in long-term animal toxicology studies.”

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