Food - pesticides and other chemicals

Summary

- Chemicals are used in plant and animal farming to boost production and ensure an adequate food supply.
- The use of pesticides, antibiotics and hormones in Australia is strictly regulated to ensure the safety of the consumer.
- Ways to reduce exposure include washing and peeling fruits and vegetables, trimming meats of any visible fat and cooking meat thoroughly.

Chemicals such as pesticides, antibiotics and hormones are used in plant and animal farming to boost production and ensure adequate food supply. Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) sets the maximum allowed limits for agricultural and veterinary chemical residues present in foods in Australia (both domestic and imported foods).

The levels of agricultural and chemical residues that are allowed in foods are considered safe and must represent the lowest level possible, complying with best industry practices.

The use of pesticides can dramatically increase crop production and ensure a higher quality of produce. However, pesticides are also toxic chemicals designed to kill agricultural pests, and some can cause problems if they are consumed by humans in large amounts.

In animal farming, drugs such as antibiotics and hormones are used to boost growth and cut down on feed requirements. Residues of these drugs can also be hazardous to humans. The level of harm from exposure to pesticides, animal antibiotics and hormones is dose related, meaning the more you consume, the greater the potential risk.

Chemical sensitivities and food

Some people are more sensitive than others to pesticide residues. However, allergic reactions and sensitivities to naturally occurring chemicals – such as those found in eggs, shellfish, milk and nuts – are much more common.

Pesticide residues and food

The levels of pesticide residue in fruits and vegetables have been closely monitored in Australia for the past 30 years. For most pesticides, a minimum time between spraying and harvesting of produce is set to ensure safe food. Levels of chemical residues in Australia are consistently found to be very low and well within safe limits.

Government-run produce-monitoring programs are in place to regulate the proper use of farm chemicals such as pesticides. The amount of pesticide residue in food depends on many factors including:

- the type and amount of pesticide used
- the amount of rain, wind and sunshine that fell on the crop
- the kind of processing that food undergoes, such as storage time, washing or peeling.

Balancing food supply and pesticides

The challenge is to balance a reliable, high-quality food supply with the need to protect the consumer from unnecessary exposure to chemicals. Maximum limits for safe human consumption of pesticide residue include wide safety margins. However, past experience has shown that, sometimes, a pesticide that is thought to be safe for human consumption has undesirable effects.

One example is DDT because of its environmental persistence and ability to accumulate in body fat. Although DDT is no longer used in Australian crop production, it is still used in some countries.

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Antibiotics in animal farming

Antibiotics are drugs that kill bacteria. They are used in animal farming to keep animals healthy, promote growth and cut down the amount of feed required. The over-use of antibiotics may increase the possibility of breeding antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria.

Regulations demand that animals are not given any antibiotics in the few weeks leading up to slaughter. This will help reduce the amount of antibiotic residue left behind in the meat. There are some concerns that antibiotic residues in milk can make people who are already susceptible to an allergic reaction, much more sensitive to penicillin.

Hormones in animal farming

Sex hormones, such as oestrogen and testosterone, are used in cattle to accelerate weight gain so they can be sent to market earlier, and have been widely used in the Australian beef industry for over 30 years. The use of hormones is highly regulated by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA), which ensures they are safe for consumers and not harmful to animals.

Eating meat that contains unacceptably high levels of hormones can lead to many side effects in people, including breast enlargement and ovarian cysts, although this is unlikely in Australia due to tight regulations.

Organic food

Many people choose to buy organic produce to avoid pesticide residues. Organic farming grows produce without the use of synthetic chemicals or pesticides.

Reducing exposure to pesticides and other chemicals

To reduce your exposure to pesticides and other chemicals:

- Thoroughly wash all fruits and vegetables.
- Buy organic produce.
- Grow your own vegetables.
- Peel vegetables or remove the outer layer of leaves.
- Trim visible fat from meats, as many residues are fat soluble.
- Cook meat and chicken thoroughly.
- Consume a variety of foods (including meat alternatives like legumes, tofu, nuts and eggs) to reduce your intake of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, hormones and pesticides.

Where to get help

- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Your doctor

Things to remember

- Chemicals are used in plant and animal farming to boost production and ensure an adequate food supply.
- The use of pesticides, antibiotics and hormones in Australia is strictly regulated to ensure the safety of the consumer.
- Ways to reduce exposure include washing and peeling fruits and vegetables, trimming meats of any visible fat and cooking meat thoroughly.