

Living well: Optimizing your nutrition & detoxifying your kitchen
Session I: Pesticides

Olga Naidenko, PhD (00:00):

We are kind of switching gears. We talked a lot about what products we have in the kitchen what products we buy for the kitchen. But we really only now, in the closing quarter hour of our conversation tonight, are talking about what the kitchen is for. There are lots of resources [from] over the years of the existence of EWG. In fact, next year, EWG is celebrating our 30-year anniversary. So, from the start of EWG in 1990, one of EWG's, very first reports was on pesticides as they affect children. Now the situation is a little bit better since 1993, because for some of the really toxic pesticides, there has been a little bit of progress about getting those pesticides off the market, but there are still a lot of pesticides that are legally meeting the full consent of the Environmental Protection Agency, the federal agency that regulates pesticides in the U.S. Those pesticides are used in the field.

Olga Naidenko, PhD (01:06):

And they add up on our produce. EWG publishes lots of resources. We have EWG Shopper's Guide, which looks at pesticide residue testing in different types of produce. That is a test that the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducts; that's not a test commissioned by EWG. EWG also has some of our own test reports. Our EWG Shopper's Guide lists, as you can see here, "Dirty Dozen" and "Clean 15." It basically takes that vast dataset generated by the USDA, or U.S. Department of Agriculture, and looks at which types of produce have the highest levels of pesticide. And as related to that work, EWG is focusing on some of the pesticides where the available toxicity data really show that those pesticides simply should not be used. So I'm sure everybody now wants to know: "Oh, canceling pesticide and kale.

Olga Naidenko, PhD (02:11):

What is that?" It's a pesticide called dacthal, not a household name, like glyphosate or Roundup, that probably many audience members have heard. I actually do have a little bit of good news after years of advocacy by EWG and other groups. Just this year, the EPA has announced that they are going to move to phase out the pesticide dacthal that has some other names — again, not common names — to finally phase it out, meaning to require that this pesticide should no longer be used in the United States. Now we can say we are almost there to get the pesticide. It's found on kale even like two, four years ago, when EWG commissioned our own test, we still saw it on kale, USDA testing. EWG has submitted petitions to EPA, writing technical comment letters, organizing online advocacy. Our organization does a lot with our online supporters, basically saying that while avoiding pesticides in general is good, there are some pesticides which should be the first ones to phase out.

Olga Naidenko, PhD (03:23):

On this particular one, dacthal, I am cautiously optimistic. I am hopeful that we will see a phaseout of the pesticide that will not be the end of the bed. And that's why EWG creates this Shopper's Guide, ranking different types of problems. But also here, I would love to stop so that we can go to questions. I would love to stop with a dose of realism: Eating fruits and vegetables is essential. It's essential for everybody. It's especially essential for people who may have received a cancer diagnosis, that perhaps are going for treatment. Well, good diet is essential. Any vegetable, any food is better than no food. But again, when the opportunity to purchase organic as an economic opportunity or as a simple availability of organic produce in the place where one lives, when that opportunity presents itself, EWG does find that is a better option,

especially for produce that is high in pesticides. I'm sure we'll have lots of questions there. I will close with a closing slide. Our shopping choices matter. All our conversation tonight was about this. EWG also has a YouTube channel with lots of fun videos by the EWG scientists and EWG policy experts who talk about these issues. So, if you would like to learn more about our work, you can also visit EWG's YouTube channel.

Jean Sachs, LBBC (04:49):

Thanks, Olga. I just want to remind people that especially this time of year, often, there'll be local farmers, and farmers markets. There are ways to buy some of this produce where they are not using pesticides. So, there's always a great option. I know there are always questions about the best way to clean your fruits and vegetables — so is it just water, or do you recommend something else?

Olga Naidenko, PhD (05:18):

First of all, that's really a great question. Because one does see a lot of products out there, which talk about how they basically are green products that sell low concentration of detergents. And many people enjoy using those, especially for washing food. An interesting aspect of those types of produce cleaners is that the same limitation applies to them as to the cleaning products I spoke about. I am not particularly concerned about toxicity, but I am concerned about whether those cleaning products fully disclose their ingredients. That's kind of the challenge: whether one, if one chooses to use those basically mild detergent-type products, after that rinsing with water completely is totally essential. It comes back to water wash and peel —this is really what I would recommend.

Lynn Folkman, LBBC (06:13):

Thank you. There was a question: If you buy your own plants to grow, is there a benefit to buying ones that have been grown organically, or is it good enough not to add chemicals yourself to grow them?

Olga Naidenko, PhD (06:29):

That, that's a great question. And yet, well, whether buying seedlings, buying seeds, as there are many options, both conventional and organic, I would go with realism. It's better to grow anything so that if you have your own seedlings. ... But I would mention, especially for people who live in urban settings, perhaps starting a community garden, perhaps gardening in one's own backyard. I would recommend is checking, if one can test, the soil, because the soil may have some heavy metal contamination from years. Many people, especially in urban settings, opt for raised beds, so as to use fresher soil produced by our organic preference. I may have my little plot of land, that land might look good, but it may have contamination from 40 years ago. So that's why I would actually focus my effort to make sure that the soil that one uses is right. Once the soil is right, avoiding synthetic pesticides and finding a way to fight those pests, those will be the next steps.

Jean Sachs, LBBC (07:37):

Those are great suggestions. There are really good fertilizers you can get. I've been doing a lot to sort of make my soil and my raised beds healthier. I always look at that Dirty Dozen list, and it always makes me really sad because apples and some of the fruits and vegetables I think people like the most are on the list. So those would be the ones, if you're going to buy organic, to try to buy those on the Dirty Dozen list, right? And so you can prioritize, because it is more expensive. Is that what you suggest?

Olga Naidenko, PhD (08:13):

That is very much what we would suggest. And our EWG advice is always twofold. Both in foods and vegetables, number one, if one can afford it, then buying organic from the Dirty Dozen, they produce these high pesticide levels. That is step two. But step one is first, still going ahead and buying fresh foods and vegetables. Now, frozen ones are not a bad choice. And because very often I just might not find the fresh, what I need or I might not be able to afford that fresh option, frozen is a first choice because it's still minimal processing. Unlike for example canned, which some of our grandmothers were fans of — I would recommend avoiding cans. Frozen is actually not bad. Still, going for frozen, organic is my recommendation.

Lynn Folkman, LBBC (08:58):

Thank you. Someone heard that spinach is problematic for pesticides, even organic. Is that true?

Olga Naidenko, PhD (09:08):

If anybody has tried to grow spinach — also, soft leafy vegetables — pests loves them. I have seen it happen where my produce did not look nice. And so with spinaches and other soft greens, some of the problematic pesticides and insecticides [remain on the leaves]. Indeed, spinach is a really good green to buy organic. Now I take it that the question from the audience talks about that fact, but there are pesticidal-type products that are used in the organic industry. That is exactly right. But those types of products — because pests will eat any spinach, organic or conventional — which the organic industry uses are very tightly reviewed and regulated by the National Organic Standards Board, and their impact is minuscule relative to the impact of synthetic pesticides, which is huge and very negative.

Lynn Folkman, LBBC (10:07):

Great.

Jean Sachs, LBBC (10:07):

I think we can probably just take one more question, Lynn.

Lynn Folkman, LBBC (10:11):

There's a question in regard to how if someone is gardening, how they can check the soil.

Olga Naidenko, PhD (10:22):

That's a great question, since I did mention that. I would look for a local lab. For example, very often local universities would have soil researchers, because right now many municipalities are supporting the urban gardening levels. So that's where those efforts come together. For every community, the answer may be different, but I would think starting with a municipal program in support of urban garden or the local university or a community college — that's where I would start looking.