



Talking Points

a column by **Julie Berry**



Milk is milk

In a society where fast often trumps fresh and sugar-based drinks are king, the dairy industry must unify around the wholesome and safe image of milk. A push from some consumers has created an opportunity for the sale of niche products, such as organic and recombinant bovine somatotropin (rbST)-free.

While any increase in demand for dairy products should be supported, and producers of niche products should be compensated, no milk producer should propagate or support misinformation and misperceptions.

The fact is, regardless of the type of milk production system, all milk is natural and pure. It's a nutritious, nutrient-dense drink that provides a number of essential vitamins and minerals, including calcium, vitamin D and potassium.

All milk must meet strict government safety standards, and no milk sold commercially includes antibiotics or pesticides. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the American Dietetic Society do not recognize any safety difference in milk produced under different management systems.

Take every opportunity to speak knowledgeably about milk, using these Talking Points.

What makes organic dairies different?

Both organic and regular milk are natural and pure. Milk labeled organic refers to a dairy's management practices. They feed their animals organic feed and grain, use organic fertilizers and pest controls, pasture their cows and abstain from using antibiotics or hormones to treat animals.

What about hormones?

Hormones are naturally present in all milk. While some dairies use a supplemental hormone, the safety of this has been affirmed and reaffirmed by leading national and international health and agricultural organizations over the past 15 years. Carton-to-carton, bottle-to-bottle, milk does not have any significant differences in hormone levels.

What has prompted some dairies that have used rbST to stop using it?

Dairy processors have requested milk from cows that have not received rbST. They say this is in response to consumer demand. Some producers are concerned about being asked to sacrifice a good and proven milk production practice that is safe for the cow and increases efficiency without adequate compensation. Profit margins

on dairies continue to narrow, and loss of rbST further widens the profit gap between dairies that produce the milk and stores that sell it.

What about antibiotics?

Every tanker load of milk is tested for antibiotics to ensure it does not contain them and that it meets the government's stringent health and safety guidelines. In the rare case that antibiotics are found in a load of milk, it is dumped and never goes into the milk supply chain.

Cows are not routinely treated with antibiotics; dairy managers focus on cow comfort and prevention. If a cow becomes ill, both organic and conventional dairies can treat it with an antibiotic. On a conventional dairy, milk from that cow is not shipped. On an organic dairy, that cow must be sold.

What about pesticides?

The most recent Food and Drug Administration (FDA) data available (2003) indicated that all milk tested was completely free of pesticide residue.

Does organic milk taste better?

The taste of milk, regardless of how it's produced, can differ slightly from carton to carton and season to season. Location of the dairy, breed of cow, type of feed fed and time of year can impact taste. Processing, such as ultrapasteurization for longer freshness, can also affect flavor. Milk flavor is ultimately an individual choice.

Is organic milk fresher than other milk?

Dairy farmers and processors work hard to provide fresh milk to the marketplace. Most milk, including organic milk, is delivered to stores within a few days of its being picked up at a dairy.

If I buy organic, am I doing more to support small family dairies?

No. Dairies of all sizes produce organic and nonorganic milk. Of the 63,000 dairy farms in America today, the majority are small with less than 200 cows. Regardless of size, the vast majority of all dairies are family owned and operated.

Why does organic milk cost more than other milk?

Organic farmers pay more to purchase organic grain, and it costs to follow the government standards required by the "certified organic" label.

FYI

Julie Berry is the agricultural outreach coordinator with the New York Animal Agriculture Coalition. The coalition is a farmer-driven organization that seeks to improve the business climate for animal agriculture through public relations efforts that target youths, consumers and producers. Members include Cayuga Marketing, New York Farm Bureau and Northeast Dairy Producers Association (NEDPA).

To learn more about the coalition, see its website: www.farmskeepnygreen.com

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