

## MYTH 2: INDUSTRIAL FOOD IS SAFE, HEALTHY, AND NUTRITIOUS

### **The Truth:**

**Industrial agriculture contaminates our vegetables and fruits with pesticides, slips dangerous bacteria into our lettuce, and puts genetically engineered growth hormones into our milk. It is not surprising that cancer, food-borne illnesses, and obesity are at an all-time high.**

A modern supermarket produce aisle presents a perfect illusion of food safety. Consistency is a hallmark. Dozens of apples are on display, waxed and polished to a uniform luster, few if any bearing a bruise or dent or other distinguishing characteristics. Nearby sit stacked pyramids of oranges dyed an exact hue to connote ripeness. Perhaps we find a shopper comparing two perfectly similar cellophane-wrapped heads of lettuce, as if trying to distinguish between a set of identical twins. Elsewhere, throughout the store, processed foods sit front and center on perfectly spaced shelves, their bright, attractive cans, jars, and boxes bearing colorful photographs of exquisitely prepared and presented foods. They all look unthreatening, perfectly safe, even good for you. And for decades, agribusiness, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have proclaimed boldly that the United States has the safest food supply in the world.

As with all the myths of industrial agriculture, things are not exactly as they appear. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report that between 1970 and 1999, food-borne illnesses increased more than tenfold. And according to the FDA, at least 53 pesticides classified as carcinogenic are presently applied in massive amounts to our major food crops. While the industrialization of the food supply progresses, we are witnessing an explosion in human health risks and a significant decrease in the nutritional value of our meals.

### **INCREASED CANCER RISK**

A central component of the industrialized food system is the large-scale introduction of toxic chemicals. This toxic contamination of our food shows no signs of decreasing. Since 1989, overall pesticide use has risen by about 8 percent, or 60 million pounds. The use of pesticides that leave residues on food has increased even more. Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that more than 1 million Americans drink water laced with pesticide runoff from industrial farms. Our increasing use of these chemicals has been paralleled by an exponential growth in health risks, to both farmers and consumers.

The primary concern associated with this toxic dependency is cancer. The EPA has already identified more than 165 pesticides as potentially carcinogenic, with numerous chemical mixtures remaining untested. Residues from potentially

carcinogenic pesticides are left behind on some of our favorite fruits and vegetables — in 1998, the FDA found pesticide residues in over 35 percent of the food tested. Many U.S. products have tested as being more toxic than those from other countries. What's worse, current standards for pesticides in food do not yet include specific protections for fetuses, infants, or young children, despite major changes to federal pesticide laws in 1996 requiring such reforms. Many scientists believe that pesticides play a major role in the current cancer "epidemic" among children. And the cancer risk does not just affect consumers; it also imperils tens of thousands of farmers, field hands, and migrant laborers. A National Cancer Institute study found that farmers who used industrial herbicides were six times more likely than non-farmers to develop non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a type of cancer. Along with their cancer risk, pesticides can cause myriad other health problems, especially for young people. For example, exposure to neurotoxic compounds like PCBs and organophosphate insecticides during critical periods of development can cause permanent, long-term damage to the brain, nervous, and reproductive systems.

### **INCREASE IN FOOD-BORNE ILLNESSES**

In addition to increased health risks associated with our current pesticide dependency, industrialized food production has also brought with it a rise in food-borne illnesses. Researchers from the CDC estimate that food-borne pathogens now infect up to 80 million people a year and cause over 9,000 deaths in the United States alone.

This increase is largely attributed to the industrialization of poultry and livestock production. Most meat products now begin in "animal factories," where food animals are confined in shockingly inhumane and overly crowded conditions, leading to widespread disease among animals and the creation of food-borne illnesses. According to the CDC, reported cases of disease from salmonella and E. coli pathogens are ten times greater than they were two decades ago, and cases of campylobacter have more than doubled. The CDC saw none of these pathogens in meat until the late 1970s when "animal factories" became the dominant means of meat production. Even our fruits and vegetables get contaminated by these pathogens through exposure to tainted fertilizers and sewage sludge. Contamination can also occur during industrialized processing and long-distance shipment.

The use of antibiotics in farm animal production may also be accelerating the alarming growth of antibiotic resistance exhibited by dangerous pathogens. Residues of these veterinary antibiotics that make their way into our food supply may confer resistance upon bacteria responsible for a wide variety of human maladies. Infections resistant to antibiotics are now the 11th leading cause of death in the United States. Guided by popular media reports, we may hastily conclude that doctors, by overprescribing antibiotics for people, are solely to blame for growing resistance. This assessment, however, ignores the fact that nearly 50 percent of U.S. antibiotics are given to animals, not people.

## **KILLER FOODS**

The introduction of fast, processed, and frozen foods in the 1950s has forever changed our dietary habits. At least 175,000 fast-food restaurants have sprouted among the gas stations, strip malls, and convenience stores of America's ever creeping suburban sprawl. Frozen dinners, prepackaged meals, and take-out burgers have, for many people, replaced the home-cooked meal. Consequently, people are consuming more calories, preservatives, and sugar than ever in history, while reducing their intake of fresh whole fruits and vegetables. It is no mystery that these changes have led to overwhelming increases in obesity, Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease among Americans. About one in three Americans is overweight, and obesity is now at epidemic levels in the United States. According to a joint New York University/Center for Science in the Public Interest report "added sugars — found largely in junk foods such as soft drinks, cakes, and cookies — squeeze healthier foods out of the diet. That sugar now accounts for 16 percent of the calories consumed by the average American and 20 percent of teenagers' calories. Twenty years ago, teens consumed almost twice as much milk as soda; today they consume almost twice as much soda as milk." The Surgeon General has determined that two out of every three premature deaths is related to diet.

## **NEW TECHNOLOGIES: A CLEANER CURSE**

The purveyors of industrial food, when confronted with the health crisis that their food has caused, respond by assuring us that new industrial technologies will be a quick fix. For example, in response to the huge increase in food-borne illnesses, the industry promotes the use of irradiation to sanitize our foods. Through this technology, the average hamburger, for example, may receive the equivalent of millions of chest X rays in an attempt to temporarily remove any potential bacterial contaminants. However, as the meat continues to flow through the industrial food supply, it loses its "protection" and is quickly subject to additional contamination. Meanwhile, numerous reputable studies have shown that consuming irradiated meat can cause DNA damage, resulting in abnormalities in laboratory animals and their off-spring. Moreover, irradiation can destroy essential vitamins and nutrients that are naturally present in foods and can make food taste and smell rancid.

Contrary to our government's pronouncement, industrial food is not safe. It is, in fact, becoming increasingly deadly and devoid of nutrition. Ultimately, we cannot achieve food safety through simple political fiat or technological quick fixes. Increased dependence on chemical, nuclear, or genetically engineered inputs will only intensify the problem. The real solution is a return to sound organic agricultural practices. It turns out that food production that is safe for the environment, humane to animals, and based in community and independence is also a food supply that is safe and nutritious for humans.