



## **Measuring Efforts to Reassure Consumers About Produce Safety**

**New Research Shows a Decline in Concerns About Produce Safety, Residues**

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# MEASURING EFFORTS TO REASSURE CONSUMERS ABOUT PRODUCE SAFETY

## NEW RESEARCH SHOWS A DECLINE IN CONCERNS ABOUT PRODUCE SAFETY, RESIDUES

### Research Objective:

The Alliance for Food and Farming (AFF) completed a comprehensive consumer research project in April 2022 to determine changes in the levels of concern among consumers about safety issues specific to produce. This research was conducted to help improve overall information-sharing that will reassure consumers about produce safety. With only one in 10 of us eating enough of these nutrient-dense foods every day, it is important to understand consumer concerns as well as what science-based safety information helps them make the right shopping choices for themselves and their families.

No other organization conducts this broad-based, national research specific to produce safety. Therefore, the AFF's work fills an information void since it examined various food safety issues and their impact on consumers as well as measured concern and changes in attitudes. The most recent survey work conducted by the AFF was in 2016, which underscored the need for this new research since our world has significantly changed over the last six years.

### Awareness and Concern

Overall levels of concern about produce safety have declined by 20% over 2016 survey levels. Concerns specific to pesticide residues have also decreased by 10%. These positive changes

are likely the result of increased outreach, information sharing and transparency regarding produce safety as well as consumers being focused on the pandemic and other dominating issues since the survey was last conducted in 2016.

While decreasing, it should be noted that residues are still the top safety concern among consumers. Although we are making headway in combating inaccurate fear-based messaging, this consumer response is a result of long-standing and ongoing product disparagement by certain groups of the more affordable and accessible forms of fruits and vegetables. When asked to provide unaided responses to the question: "What concerns, if any, do you have about the safety of fresh fruits and vegetables?" Thirty percent of respondents answered "chemicals/pesticides," followed by "cleanliness/washed thoroughly/freshness" at 13%.

When rating the importance of shopping considerations for fresh produce, whether the fruits and vegetables were organic (43%) ranked lowest on the aided survey list by consumers followed by whether they were locally grown (53%). Taste (92%), quality and freshness (92%), nutritional value (80%) and cost (78%) topped the list of importance. Seventy-six percent of survey respondents ranked pesticide residue risk as important followed by 75% foodborne illness risk and 58% on whether the foods were genetically modified.

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While the question was asked differently, consumers rated residue concerns as the second most important shopping consideration six years ago, however, 2022 survey respondents ranked it as fifth-most important.

### Government Regulations

Despite media reports and public statements to the contrary, when it comes to produce safety, consumers have confidence in the government regulatory systems in place to protect public health. When asked: “How confident are you that government regulations and other food safety efforts are working well to protect public health?” 78% percent responded they were very to somewhat confident with only nine percent stating they were not confident.

Further when asked: “How confident are you in each of the following groups when it comes to protecting food safety?” 73% responded they were confident in the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and 71% said they were confident in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### “Dirty Dozen” List

The survey also measured the effectiveness of AFF information against inaccurate safety claims carried by the annual release of the “dirty dozen” list through trade-off questioning. By a 2-to-1 margin, survey respondents agreed that the information shared by the AFF came closer to their view. The trade-off question:

**Some people feel:** *Conventionally grown fruits and vegetables are just as safe to eat as organic because, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Pesticide Data Program, over 99% of foods tested have residues well below safety standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency with a third having no residues at all.*

**Other people feel:** *Organically grown fruits and vegetables are safer to eat than conventionally*

*grown because, according to the Environmental Working Group’s Dirty Dozen List, nearly 70% of non-organic produce sold in the U.S. contains residues of chemical pesticides.*

This 2-to-1 margin is a significant finding and underscores the importance of the objectives and work of the Safe Fruits and Veggies campaign to reach consumers through more balanced reporting on the list release as well as direct outreach strategies to target audiences and influencers. Survey results show that when they hear science-based safety information, consumers listen, agree and are reassured about the safety of produce.

Conversely, peer reviewed research shows that when low income consumers are exposed to “dirty dozen” list messaging exclusively, they state they are less likely to purchase any produce — organic or conventionally grown. Again, this emphasizes the importance of continually and persistently providing science-based content to consumers so they can make the right shopping choices for themselves and their families.

### Sharing Science-Based Information

As stated above, among the most important objectives of the AFF’s focus group and survey work is to determine what information helps consumers when making purchasing decisions as well as providing those results to our members to assist them in their produce safety outreach. In this survey we shared information with respondents specific to pesticide residues as well as regulations and practices on pathogen prevention.

While complete results are shared below, we must emphasize the resonance of produce washing information among consumers. This was especially apparent in the focus groups where consumers repeatedly emphasized that their safety concerns were lower since they routinely wash organic and conventionally

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grown fruits and vegetables. This is a simple message and one that should be shared and highlighted more extensively based upon past and current survey results.

The information presented below resulted in a six percent decline in concerns among survey respondents from early ballot questioning.

### **Residues:**

This information generated strongly positive results with 76% to 82% of survey respondents stating they were confident in the safety of produce after reading each statement.

- Decades of nutritional research shows that increasing consumption of conventional and organic produce can improve immunity, prevent diseases and increase lifespan. In fact, health experts agree we should all eat more fruits and vegetables for better health and a longer life.
- According to the Federal Food and Drug Administration, washing fresh produce before eating is a healthful habit. You can reduce and often eliminate pesticide residues if they are present on fresh produce by washing them under running tap water.
- Providing safe, healthy food for consumers is always the main priority for farmers. After all, a farmer's first consumer is their own family.
- One peer-reviewed study that examined the risk/benefit of eating more conventional produce found that if half of Americans increased their consumption of fruits and vegetables by a single serving a day, 20,000 cancer cases could be prevented each year.
- The USDA conducts a nationally representative program that analyzes pesticide residues on foods. Over 99% of the foods tested had residues well below safety standards set by the Environmental

Protection Agency with a third having no detectable residues at all.

- Analyses by University of California toxicologists found that a child could eat hundreds to thousands of servings of a fruit or vegetable in a day and still not have any effects from pesticide residues. This shows how very low residues are, if present at all.

### **Pathogen Prevention:**

This information resulted in 79% to 83% of survey respondents stating they were confident in the safety of produce after reading each statement.

- For fruit and vegetable crops, the Food Safety Modernization Act includes a Produce Safety Rule. The Produce Safety Rule implemented science-based standards developed by the FDA for the safe growing, harvesting, and packing of fruits and vegetables. Compliance with these best practices are verified through mandatory on-farm government audits.
  - > The Produce Rule requires farmers adhere to best practices, which include water quality and water testing standards, management of domestic animals and wildlife, and employee training, among other practices.
- Among the most important aspects of food safety is a commitment to continual improvement through research and better science. In fact, there is an industry organization called the Center for Produce Safety (CPS) dedicated to finding better ways to farm safely through new research and studies conducted in conjunction with government agencies and universities.
- FDA recommends consumers wash all fresh produce under tap water to reduce the presence of dirt and bacteria that can cause food borne illness.

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## Credibility

The survey shows consumers continue to trust farmers when it comes to produce safety. When asked *“How confident are you in each of the following groups when it comes to protecting food safety,”* farmers ranked highest with 76% of respondents expressing confidence in them.

When asked to *“rate how much you trust each of the following sources to give you information about pesticide use and residues on fresh fruits and vegetables,”* USDA, farmers, your doctor/health care provider and dietitians/nutritionists topped the list.

## Conclusions:

- While concerns about pesticide residues have declined since 2016, when prompted, three-quarters of 2022 survey respondents showed awareness and concern about theoretical risks due to pesticide residues. This is what decades of disinformation about residues and produce has created. While the declining concern from 2016 survey levels shows progress, efforts to provide consumers with consistent, science-based information to counter disinformation campaigns must continue to further alleviate unfounded safety fears about the more affordable and accessible forms of produce.
- The government remains credible among consumers when it comes to protecting

produce safety and public health. Survey respondents repeatedly stated they were confident in regulatory systems in place for both residues and pathogen prevention and almost two-thirds stated government agencies were credible information sources on produce safety. Therefore continued sharing of regulatory protections and government produce safety data among key audiences is supported by the survey results.

- Farmers are the most trusted sources when it comes to protecting produce safety among those surveyed. Efforts to connect farmers to consumers and other key audiences to share information about their practices, care and commitment to grow healthy foods should remain an important component of outreach strategies. Those who perpetuate disinformation about produce safety do not have access to spokespersons with the level of credibility of farmers and that is a significant advantage for the produce industry.

## Survey Structure

Three virtual focus groups were held in March and informed the development of the survey and corresponding messaging. One thousand (1,000) individuals who stated they shopped for at least half of the groceries in the household participated in the national web-based survey. The survey was fielded from April 11 to April 15. The margin of error was 3.1%.

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