



What's Really in Your Food?

by G. Bossik on October 15th, 2012 at 3:45 pm



Residents of West Bridgewater, Massachusetts, aren't happy. They recently met to discuss concerns over the use of biosolids on local farm land, according to a recent article from The Boston Globe.

What are biosolids? They're sewage sludge that's been treated in wastewater treatment facilities. Farmers use this sludge as fertilizer. And the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has approved its use.

The EPA says on its Web site: "When treated and processed, sewage sludge becomes biosolids which can be safely recycled and applied as fertilizer to sustainably improve and maintain productive soils and stimulate plant growth."

Treated sewage sludge, or biosolids, may pose risks to *people*, though. Several studies have shown that the substance can contaminate soil with heavy metals, viruses, and pharmaceuticals.

In the 2003 study, *Biosolids and Heavy Metals in Soils*, three scientists state that biosolids contain heavy metals such as lead, nickel, cadmium, chromium, copper, and zinc.

"Heavy metals can also contaminate the food chain and reduce crop yields," the scientists add.

However, heavy metals aren't the only risk that biosolids pose to human health. This sludge can also contain viruses.

Scientist Kelvin Wong and two other colleagues detected human adenoviruses in biosolids. They reported their findings in the 2010 study, *Quantification of Enteric Viruses, Pathogen Indicators, and Salmonella Bacteria in Class B Anaerobically Digested Biosolids by Culture and Molecular Methods*.

According to the CDC's Web site, adenoviruses cause respiratory illnesses such as the common cold, [pneumonia](#), [croup](#), and [bronchitis](#).

Another group of scientists found that biosolids are polluted with accumulations of pharmaceuticals. Their findings were published in the study, *Occurrence and Loss Over Three Years of 72 Pharmaceuticals and Personal Care Products from Biosolids-Soil Mixtures in Outdoor Mesocosms*.

Evelyn Walters and two colleagues compiled the data for the study and found that treated sewage contained two classes of antibiotics, a fungicide, an antihistamine, a lipid regulator, an antidepressant, and an anticonvulsant.

But what can you do to avoid the contaminants found in treated sewage sludge? Eating organic [food](#) is a good start.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will only certify food as organic if it meets certain guidelines such as no use of sewage sludge in the production of the food.

Look for the USDA Organic seal on food products. Stonyfield makes organic yogurt, and there are many other certified organic foods available from Organic Valley, Rocky Mountain Organic Meats, and other companies.

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