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Official: organic really is better

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THE biggest study into organic food has found that it is more nutritious than ordinary produce and may help to lengthen people's lives.

The evidence from the £12m four-year project will end years of debate and is likely to overturn government advice that eating organic food is no more than a lifestyle choice.

The study found that organic fruit and vegetables contained as much as 40% more antioxidants, which scientists believe can cut the risk of cancer and heart disease, Britain's biggest killers. They also had higher levels of beneficial minerals such as iron and zinc.

Professor Carlo Leifert, the co-ordinator of the European Union-funded project, said the differences were so marked that organic produce would help to increase the nutrient intake of people not eating the recommended five portions a day of fruit and vegetables. "If you have just 20% more antioxidants and you can't get your kids to do five a day, then you might just be okay with four a day," he said.

This weekend the Food Standards Agency confirmed that it was reviewing the evidence before deciding whether to change its advice. Ministers and the agency have said there are no significant differences between organic and ordinary produce.

Researchers grew fruit and vegetables and reared cattle on adjacent organic and nonorganic sites on a 725-acre farm attached to Newcastle University, and at other sites in Europe. They found that levels of antioxidants in milk from organic herds were up to 90% higher than in milk from conventional herds.

As well as finding up to 40% more antioxidants in organic vegetables, they also found that organic tomatoes from Greece had significantly higher levels of antioxidants, including flavo-noids thought to reduce coronary heart disease.

Leifert said the government was wrong about there being no difference between organic and conventional produce. "There is enough evidence now that the level of good things is higher in organics," he said.