

## **"Natural" Milk -- Better for Whom?**

By Ruth Kava, Ph.D., R.D.

Consumers who think organic milk is in some way more healthful than the conventional version but who don't want to (or can't) pay the stiff premium such products usually require, now have yet another kind of milk to choose from. It's so-called "natural" milk -- milk that isn't "organic," but comes from cows certified to be free of treatment with recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST). While this milk is less expensive than the organic variety, it still commands a surcharge compared to conventional milk. And for what? The only benefit consumers will get from this product is psychological -- the belief that they are buying a superior product. While a strong placebo effect is nothing to sneeze at, marketing a product with no known benefits as somehow superior doesn't quite seem right, although the whole organic industry thrives on it.

Whether or not a cow has been treated with rBST makes no difference to the quality or safety of her milk. Cows produce plenty of their own BST -- they have to or they wouldn't be giving milk at all. The only thing the additional rBST does is maintain the levels of BST at early lactation levels for an extended period -- thus increasing the cow's productivity (see ACSH's report on rBST and an earlier blog post). The fact is that there has never been any substantiated scientific study showing that milk from cows treated with rBST is any different from milk from untreated cows. The hormones are so similar that you can't tell them apart, nor can the FDA.

Anti-biotechnology activists have convinced some people that rBST given to cows poses a human health problem, in spite of the fact that the FDA has determined that this is not true and, in fact, doesn't even allow rBST-specific labeling on milk. So who really stands to gain from the sale of "natural" milk? Not consumers, surely -- but perhaps it keeps the marketers busy and creative.

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