



"I never did a day's work in my life. It was all fun."
—Thomas Edison

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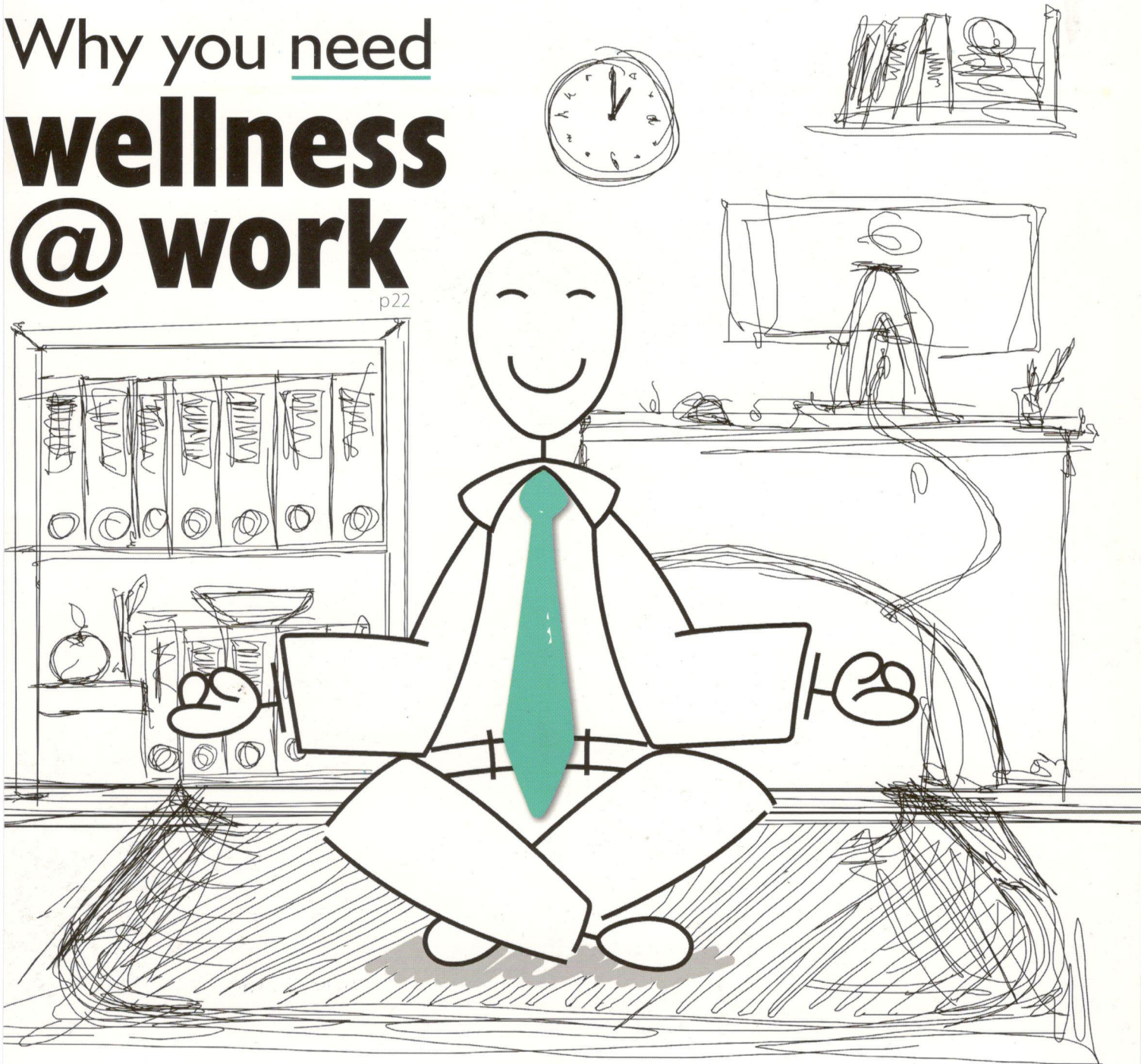
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Organic concerns

You'll stop looking at organic foods through coloured glasses once you realise that they aren't what they are made out to be

■ By Hiteshi Dhami-Shah

One of the health trends doing the rounds is of turning to organic foods. However, many people don't even consider it, brushing it off as a passing fad with an expensive price tag. Organic food is not a fad, but a lifestyle choice. It is produce [vegetables, fruits] that is grown using natural fertilisers such as manure and compost to promote plant growth. To tackle infestations by pests and plant diseases, the farmers use friendly insects and birds instead of chemicals. Crops are rotated or hand-weeded to manage the weeds. Food that is not organically grown is produced using chemical fertilisers, insecticides, herbicides to promote growth and prevent pest and disease.

Myth 1: Organic foods are not grown using fertilisers and pesticides.

It is imperative to use fertilisers and pesticides to protect the crops from infestation and disease. They are also required to replace the lost nutrients from the soil, which the plants absorb. The difference between conventionally-grown crops and organically-grown ones is that the fertilisers used in the former are chemicals, while the ones used in organic farming are natural fertilisers made from consumer and animal waste. Insects, birds and rodents are used for pest control.

Myth 2: Organic foods have more contaminants than conventional produce since the plants are encouraged to absorb most nutrients from the soil

It's the other way round; conventionally grown food has comparatively higher levels of pesticides than organic food. That's the reason why it's always advised to peel a thick skin of fruits and vegetables to minimise consumption of pesticide residue.

Eating organic foods reduces the consumption of pesticides and thereby their damaging effects such as reduced fertility and poor immunity. Conventional farming makes use of antibiotics for stimulating growth in plants. This exposes us to antibiotic-resistant organisms via the food we eat, which, in turn, makes us antibiotic-resistant. In organic farming, the usage of antibiotics is restricted to treatment of illness in the livestock. The nutrients absorbed by the plants are natural and not chemical. Although manure is used, it decomposes to release fertilisers for the plant.

The only major concern associated with use of animal waste, particularly manure is the presence of pathogens that are capable of infecting humans.

Myth 3: Organic food is less nutritious since natural fertilisers aren't powerful

Studies have shown that there is no difference in the nu-

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tritional content of organic and conventionally-produced foods. The only difference seen is in the amount of phytonutrients [type of antioxidant. A research by the University of California, Davis, found that organically-grown tomatoes had higher levels of phytochemicals and vitamin C than conventionally-grown ones.

Myth 4: Organic food is expensive

Rotating crops, using animal husbandry, and manual labour makes organic farming an expensive proposition. The produce thus is more expensive than conventionally-grown food. Part of the reason for such higher prices is the novelty factor attached to organic foods. Production in small quantity further drives up the cost as economies of scale aren't achieved. Hence, as of now, organic foods seem like an indulgence. But if you consider the effects of chemical contamination on our health, it seems like an inexpensive proposition.

Myth 5: You don't need to wash organic food as it's not grown using chemicals

Organic foods are susceptible to being infected by bacteria such as E. coli and should be washed. The only organic foods that can be consumed without washing are fruits with thick skin such as oranges and sweet limes since you don't consume the skin. Still, it is better to wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating them as they can be contaminated not only during farming but also during storage and transportation.

Myth 6: Organic food doesn't taste good

As far as the academia is concerned, there is no difference between the taste of organic food and conventional food. If you had an organic orange in one hand and a conventionally-grown one in the other, you would hardly be able to tell the difference from its shape, size, colour or even taste. However, more and more chefs are turning to organic produce for its superior taste and freshness.

But studies show that organic is perceived as 'better tasting'. So while the debate on whether organic food is more tasty continues, it is certain that it's not less tasty than conventional food. Also, since taste is a subjective matter, it's better that you judge from experience.

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