

Rumors on Aspartame

If you have spent anytime online, chances are you have stumbled on Web sites with screaming headlines and well written text attempting to scare Internet surfers about artificial sweeteners, especially Aspartame (NutraSweet), which is alleged by these doomsayers to cause all sorts of maladies, including methanol toxicity, vision problems, headaches, fatigue, brain cancer, lupus, and even multiple sclerosis. In fact, with the last year, millions of people have reported receiving ominous, official looking email messages about aspartame's alleged hazards.

In response, hundreds of readers have emailed, and written to many organizations, wondering if there is any validity to these doom and gloom messages, which are spreading like wildfire over cyberspace. So, to get to the bottom of this issue, we went straight to the top and asked the real experts - scientists who have actually investigated the effects of aspartame in 'clinical studies'. And what we discovered was that the overwhelming majority of these experts not only say these rumors are groundless, but that aspartame may actually be healthier than nature's natural sweetener: sugar - which, unlike aspartame, has been scientifically linked to numerous health problems, including osteoporosis, cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and obesity - not to mention the time honored association between sugary foods and tooth decay.

According to officials at the Food and Drug Administration, the safety of aspartame is, in their words, "clear cut". The FDA calls aspartame one of the most thoroughly tested and studied food additives it has ever approved, adding that more than 100 toxicological and clinical studies it has reviewed confirm that aspartame is safe for the general population.

Agreeing with the FDA's stance on this issue are other health organizations such as the American Medical Association and the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation. In a report on the FDA's Web site, David Hattan, Ph/D., acting director of the FDA's division of health effects evaluation, says there is no "credible evidence" to support, for example, a link between aspartame and multiple sclerosis or systemic lupus. Dr. David Squillacote, senior medical advisor to the MS Foundation, agrees, telling Newsday that the claims "are rabidly inaccurate and scandalously misinformative."

Other circulating reports have linked aspartame with brain tumors. However, an analysis conducted by the FDA of the National Cancer Institute's public database on cancer incidence in the United States- the SEER Program- does not support an association between the use of aspartame and increased incidences of brain tumors or cancer. "Both our scientists and those at the National Cancer Institute have looked very carefully at brain-tumor trends," Dr. Michael A. Friedman, deputy commissioner for operations at the FDA and the Administration's senior adviser for science, told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. We find no association between aspartame consumption and human brain tumors."

Still other reports attempt to link aspartame to methanol toxicity. In truth, methanol toxicity from aspartame is not a serious concern, Timothy Maher, director of pharmaceutical sciences at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, told the Minneapolis Star Tribune. In fact, there's more methanol in a can of tomato juice than most products containing aspartame.

And as for claims of vision problems, headaches, dizziness, and fatigue rumored to be associated with aspartame intake, the FDA notes that it has investigated the artificial sweetener since 1981, and to date, there is "no scientific credibility to any of these complaints."

The real harm, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in Washington, D.C., lies not with aspartame but with sugar. According to a recently released CSPI report, in 1996, America's per capita consumption of sugar was 152 lbs, about 25 lbs more than a decade earlier. Moreover, the CSPI reports that added sugars-as opposed to those that appear naturally in, for example, a piece of fruit-account for 16% of the calories consumed by the average American and 20% of calories consumed by teenagers. The recommended percentage is no more than ten.

Today, Americans consume well over one-third of their sugar in soft drinks. And overall, Americans are consuming twice as much soda as they did 25 years ago. All these unnecessary, non-nutritious calories, say researchers, may be in part responsible for the excess calories that lead to obesity. One recent study found that sugary beverages provide more calories to those who are overweight than to non-overweight people. And in a study published last April in the Journal of the American College of Nutrition, researchers discovered that the

amount of fat absorbed from sugar-sweetened beverages was 38% to 60% higher than that absorbed from aspartame-sweetened beverages containing the same macronutrient (i.e., protein, carb, and fat) levels. The bottom line? Researchers and scientists alike - people who've actually done their homework and investigated the issue firsthand - give aspartame a thumbs up, while at the same time, cautioning the excess of sugar, not artificial sweeteners, as the true cause for concern.