

Health Tips

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Health Tip: Artificial Sweeteners

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Last week the five FDA-approved artificial sweeteners were discussed along with their reported benefits. This week we'll look at several of the health concerns that have been raised regarding these products and see which are considered to be the safest for human consumption. This information has come primarily from: 1) the manufacturers (who of course are uniformly bullish about their products); 2) the US Food and Drug Administration (who has approved their use); and 3) a consumer group, the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#) (who continue to carefully scrutinized each of these products).



Saccharin (Sweet 'N Low) was the first, and is perhaps the most controversial of the artificial sweeteners. In 1977, the FDA actually proposed banning saccharin because of studies indicating that it caused cancer in animals. The case for continuing its use was successfully argued in Congress and it was allowed to be used as long as products containing saccharin had a warning label.

Saccharin then underwent additional study, and while a link with cancer in rodents was still evident, this link was felt to be related to a mechanism that wasn't relevant to humans. In May 2000, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services removed saccharin from its list of cancer-causing chemicals. Currently, the warning label on saccharin-containing products is not required. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, however, considers it "highly imprudent" to remove saccharin from the list of potential carcinogens. In their opinion, additional study is necessary to confirm the safety of a product potentially affecting "tens of millions" human beings.

Aspartame (Equal, NutraSweet) Like several other artificial sweeteners, aspartame has been suspected of having links to cancer. In the mid-1990's a concern was expressed that aspartame may be responsible for a rise in the incidence of brain cancer in the United States. The National Toxicological Program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services conducted

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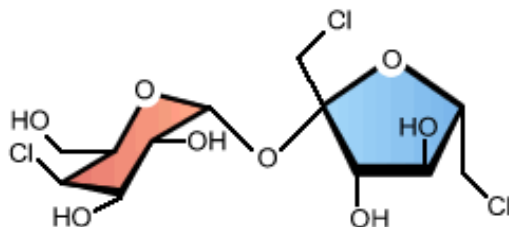
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animal studies to investigate this concern and found no link between aspartame and cancer. Later, in 2005, a European group reported that aspartame was responsible for causing leukemia and lymphoma in laboratory rats. Following a re-evaluation of the data, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) refuted this conclusion. In a 2006 study, U.S. National Cancer Institute researchers studied a large number of adults 50 to 69 years of age over a five-year period and found no evidence that aspartame posed any risk. At this time, the Food and Drug Administration considers aspartame to be safe. The watch dog group, Center for Science in the Public Interest, however, isn't so convinced. They have recommended additional study to evaluate its safety.

Acesulfame-K (Sweet One, Sunette, and Sweet 'n Safe) Although acesulfame-K is approved by the FDA, the jury seems to be out in regard to the safety of this sweetener. Most of the studies evaluating its potential for causing cancer have been criticized because of methodological flaws. Two studies involving laboratory rats, however, did suggest that the additive could cause cancer. This compelled the Center for Science in the Public to urge the FDA to require better testing before permitting the use of acesulfame-K. Its manufacturer, Hoechst, a German chemical company, points out that almost 100 studies have been conducted on acesulfame-K and that it has consistently been shown to be safe for human consumption. It is currently being used in more than 5,000 food, beverage and pharmaceutical products in over 100 countries around the world.

Neotame, the sweetest of all the artificial sweeteners, is used much less than the others. It was approved by the U.S. FDA in 2002. Neotame is produced by the same manufacturer of aspartame (NutraSweet Co.) and is chemically similar. One important difference between the two is that since it is not metabolized into phenylalanine, it is considered to be safe for those with phenylketonuria (PKU). While the Center for Science in the Public Interest gave its cousin, aspartame an "avoid" rating, perhaps because only tiny amounts of neotame are needed to sweeten foods, it has received a "safe" rating.



Sucralose (Splenda) At one time, its manufacturer (McNeil Nutritionals) used the slogan "made from sugar, so it tastes like sugar" to market sucralose. In its production, the sugar used is so chemically altered, however, that the US Sugar

Association was able to require them to stop using this slogan. While artificial, and in spite of concerns posted on the internet, the Center for Science in the Public Interest considers it to be safe. Perhaps the most concerning aspect of sucralose is that it contains chlorine, a known carcinogen. Despite this, no studies to date have demonstrated a link between sucralose and cancer. The FDA reviewed studies related to sucralose and determined that it does not pose carcinogenic, reproductive, or neurological risk to human beings. A number of symptoms including bloating, diarrhea, nausea, hives, wheezing, cough and depression have been attributed to sucralose ingestion, but again, none of these have been confirmed in scientific studies. Its safety may, to some degree, be due to the fact that less than a quarter of the sucralose consumed is actually absorbed through the gastrointestinal tract. From available data, sucralose appears to be the safest of the available artificial sweeteners.

Can you get something for nothing? With artificial sweeteners, the answer is still pending. Clearly, there are health consequences from consuming natural sugars, but concerns have been raised and not completely resolved regarding

most of the artificial sweeteners also. Even the new, low calorie natural sweetener, Stevia, a South American shrub whose leaves have been used for centuries by native peoples to sweeten beverages, appears to have a dark side. Some studies have shown that Stevia causes mutations and DNA damage, which raises the prospect that it could cause cancer. With continued study of all of these products, I anticipate that we could see new warnings regarding some of them while others are exonerated. Which ones fall into which category will be up to the scientists studying them to determine.

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