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Editorial

The Safety of Aspartame

Aspartame, an artificial sweetener used by more than 200 million people around the world, has passed numerous safety evaluations in the past quarter-century. It is used as a tabletop sweetener (Equal, NutraSweet) and as an ingredient in more than 6,000 processed foods, including diet sodas, desserts, candy and yogurt, among others. But now comes a provocative if inconclusive report that says aspartame may cause cancer, even at levels long considered safe. There is no reason for panic, but surely good reason for regulatory authorities to look again at this much-studied sweetener.

The new alarm was raised by a large study in laboratory rats conducted at the European Ramazzini Foundation in Italy. The study found a statistically significant increase in lymphomas, leukemias and other cancers in rats that were fed aspartame for a lifetime and compared with rats that were not. Excess cancers were found even in rats fed doses equal to 20 milligrams per kilogram of body weight, well below the 50-milligram level currently deemed acceptable for humans in the United States. If these results hold up under further scrutiny, the guidelines will need re-evaluation.

The study has definite strengths that add to its credence. It used a much larger number of laboratory rats — 1,900 in all — than any previous study, and it administered a wider range of doses, making it more likely that effects would be seen.

But the study could turn out to be a false alarm. There was an abnormally low incidence of cancers in a key control group, which could have made the cancer rate in rats fed aspartame look worse than it really was. And there was only a very weak relationship between the doses of aspartame administered and the cancer rate, which makes it hard to be sure that aspartame was causing the tumors. This study needs to be analyzed by other researchers and possibly followed up by additional animal studies.

The Food and Drug Administration has asked the Italian researchers for a detailed rat-by-rat report, not just the overall results made available so far. The Ramazzini group has an obligation to make its full findings public quickly if it expects regulators to take urgent action. Meanwhile, consumers of aspartame can either wait for a final verdict or switch to products containing sucralose (Splenda), a sweetener that some food activists deem safer.