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CONSUMER HEALTH DAILY - REPORTS

Published: July 2, 2007 at 9:25 AM

Eat To Live: New fears over aspartame

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LE BUGUE, France, July 2 (UPI) -- Two years ago, Italian researchers at the prestigious Ramazzini Foundation of Oncology and Environmental Sciences published a study that showed feeding rats aspartame at levels per body weight close to those of humans led to an increase in brain tumors, lymphomas and leukemia in the females.

Aspartame, familiar to consumers as brand names NutraSweet and Equal, is an artificial sweetener found globally in approximately 6,000 products.

It's contained in candy, desserts and yogurts. It's in diet sodas and hot chocolate and those sugar-free packets for coffee and tea in restaurants. It's also in some pharmaceutical products, like cough lozenges and vitamins. Some chewing gum is aspartame-sweetened.

At this level of saturation, it represents 62 percent of the artificial sweetener market.

As reported by Eat To Live last May, the FDA rejected the foundation's conclusions, saying they weren't consistent with other studies that the FDA had evaluated that confirmed aspartame was safe as a sweet alternative to sugar.

So the Ramazzini Foundation went back to the drawing board.

This time, it put 4,000 rats on doses of aspartame equivalent in respective body weight to the amount consumed by some people.

With this second investigation, they also began exposing rats to aspartame before they were born. And they allowed them to live until they died a natural death, instead of killing them at two years as in other studies elsewhere.

Their conclusions have just been published in Environmental Health Perspectives, the journal of the U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

Parents should take particular note.

Again, they found significant increases in lymphomas and leukemia. When fetuses were exposed to the sweetener, the potential carcinogenic effects increased.

A study last year from the National Cancer Institute involving 340,045 men and 226,945 women found no significant link between aspartame and cancer.

But the men and women studied were all between the ages of 50 and 69 and had only begun consuming the sweetener in adulthood.

Children are considerable consumers of aspartame through Diet Coke, Diet Pepsi, Kool-Aid, Jell-O gelatin dessert and pudding mixes and certain Popsicles.

According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the acceptable daily intake of aspartame is equivalent to a child weighing 50 pounds drinking two cans of diet soda daily, or a 150 pound adult drinking just over seven.

It encourages people not to panic. Just to stop buying products containing aspartame.

However, the Ramazzini Foundation researchers write in their study: "On the basis of the present findings, we believe that a review of the current regulations governing the use of aspartame cannot be delayed.

"This review is particularly urgent with regard to aspartame-containing beverages, heavily consumed by children."

The FDA says it has not yet reviewed the report. But it appears it still finds no reason to revise its opinion or advice to consumers.

Since the study's publication, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, on its Web site Chemical Cuisine directory, has now demoted aspartame from the "use caution" category to "everyone should avoid". It also gives thumbs down to acesulfame.

If you want a sweet alternative to sugar, it recommends sucralose, commonly known by the brand name Splenda.

To satisfy a sweet tooth craving, try chewing on dried apricots or a handful of dried prunes or raisins. Stewing then pureeing dried apricots provides a very sweet sauce to pour round or over ice cream or slices of cake that already contain enough of the sugar you crave that you don't need to increase the amount with a butterscotch or chocolate sauce.

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