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Food Additive Loopholes



50 years ago, Congress passed a law that was intended to ensure that chemicals intentionally added to foods were safe.

The Food Additives Amendment of 1958 requires that proposed new food additives be tested by manufacturers and accepted by the Food and Drug Administration as posing a "reasonable certainty of no harm." And it bans any chemical that causes cancer in animals.

However, the law—and its enforcement—has proven to be weaker than its sponsors intended.

Among the loopholes:

■ **Is it truly GRAS?**

Congress felt that some chemicals—like vinegar and starch—were so obviously safe that they weren't worth testing. So many food ingredients were declared GRAS, or "generally recognized as safe."

But companies can declare that their new chemicals are GRAS without having to notify the FDA. (Most do notify the agency, which gives a quick "no further questions" okay or requests more research.)

That's why stevia, a natural non-calorie sweetener, is now on the market even though it needs further testing (see p. 9). It's outrageous that companies can put stuff into our food without even letting the FDA know.

If GRAS substances were always safe, they wouldn't be a problem. But the FDA's GRAS list includes the two most harmful substances in our food supply—salt and partially hydrogenated oil—although each causes fatal heart attacks in tens of thousands of people a year.

■ **Who tests?** The food additives law allows the companies that want to market chemicals

to do the testing. That creates an obvious conflict of interest, just as it does when pharmaceutical companies test new drugs.

■ **Short lifetimes.** Lifetime feeding studies on both rats and mice are necessary to help assess cancer risk. (One problem with stevia is that it was tested only on rats, not mice.) Lifetime should mean *lifetime*, from conception through old age.

But in many cases, testing begins when the animals are four weeks old and ends after two years, even though the animals would normally live another year or so.

That's the equivalent of looking for adverse effects in people only up to age 65. Longer studies cost more...and might uncover problems that manufacturers would rather not find.

What's more, the FDA puts an almost impossible burden of proof on those who contend that harmful additives should be removed from the market.

The agency allows companies to use salt and partially hydrogenated oils without any limitations. It allows foods to contain dyes, even though they cause hyperactivity in some children (see p. 10). And it allows the

artificial sweeteners aspartame and acesulfame-potassium in foods, even though animal studies suggest that they cause cancer.

The bottom line? Caveat emptor! Stick with real food. 🍌



Which food ingredients are "generally recognized as safe"? Companies can decide without telling the FDA or consumers.

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest

Correction

In the special feature in the June issue ("In the Drink"), we said that "urine doesn't have to be clear." Urine doesn't have to be colorless, but it should be clear. Cloudy urine could signal an infection.

The contents of NAH are not intended to provide medical advice, which should be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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