

Repeal of Saccharin Warning Label Leaves Consumer Group with Bitter Aftertaste -Why CSPI is beating this dead horse

By ACSH Staff — January 9, 2001

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the self-appointed "food police," is distressed that Congress has voted to repeal the warning label that has appeared on saccharin since 1977. Why is the scary little warning label soon to be a thing of the past? Because saccharin was voted off the federal "carcinogen list" because it does not cause cancer in people.

This is good news for consumers because the label never had any legitimacy in scientific reality: saccharin does not pose a human cancer threat. But CSPI's Director Michael Jacobson, Ph.D., still argues otherwise. He claims that saccharin causes cancer in mice and rats and that there is also human epidemiological evidence of a cancer link.

Here are the facts: Saccharin was discovered in 1879. It is a white crystalline powder 300 times sweeter than sugar. Early in the century, saccharin was used as a substitute for sugar in canned vegetables and beverages. Later, saccharin became popular as a sugar substitutes in the diets of people with diabetes, obesity or gout.

In March of 1977 the Food and Drug Administration announced that, on the basis of animal experiments in Canada showing an excess of cancer in male rats, it was going to ban saccharin. Americans were furious particularly because saccharin was then the only available artificial sweetener at the time. Congress intervened and saved the artificial sweetener -but slapped a warning label on the pink packets and products containing saccharin. The warning label alerted consumers to the fact that saccharin caused cancer in lab animals.

There was never any credible evidence that saccharin posed a risk of bladder or other cancer in humans. Even in the species most susceptible to adverse effects, the male rat, saccharin is a very weak carcinogen.

Saccharin is a unique substance: unlike any other additive, we actually have studies of humans who have consumed large quantities of it. For example, since diabetics are especially heavy users of saccharin, they would likely have a particularly high risk of any adverse health effects linked with the sweetener. However studies of diabetics have reported no association between the use of saccharin and the occurrence of bladder cancer.

So what is CSPI's Jacobson talking about when he writes in an official statement that "the single best epidemiological study, conducted by the National Cancer Institute found an association between the consumption of artificial sweetener and an increased risk of bladder cancer"? The study he was referring to was published in the *Lancet* in 1980. The article suggested a link between

artificial sweeteners and bladder cancer, but cautioned that "[i]nconsistencies in the data suggest that the positive associations may be due to chance."

But in the 20 years following that Lancet report, evidence gathered from many other human studies supported the theory that the association reported earlier was indeed just due to chance. The evidence simply did not indicate that saccharin was a risk factor for cancer. Indeed, CSPI seems to be the only major group of individuals in the country who still maintain that saccharin is a cancer threat and protests the removal of the label.

Why is CSPI beating this dead horse? Could it be that they are concerned that if saccharin, a substance which in high doses may cause cancer in animals, is exonerated as a human cancer risk, that there will be a domino effect and other alleged "carcinogens" (categorized only on the basis only of animal studies) will also be cleared? Is CSPI afraid that common sense and science will prevail and drown out their frequent, strident warnings about alleged poisons and carcinogens in our food?

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