CSPI Fundraising Letter Is Full of Biomedical Misinformation

By Alex Berezow, PhD — December 30, 2019

The Center for Science in the Public Interest is often consulted by the media as a legitimate voice on scientific issues. On some topics, such as the worthlessness of many dietary supplements and the dangers of raw milk, CSPI is absolutely correct. On other topics, such as sugar substitutes and pesticides, it spreads misinformation.

How's this for irony? The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is headed by a medical doctor, yet their latest fundraising letter is full of junk science, bogus health claims, and medical misinformation.

This really shouldn't be a surprise, given that one survey [2] showed that 79% of toxicologists believed that CSPI (as well as NRDC and EWG) overstate the health risks of chemicals. Scaring people is an extremely effective way to raise money (just ask any politician), and the folks at CSPI are masters of the craft.

This is a real shame because, on some issues, CSPI is spot-on. For instance, the organization warns [3] of the dangers of foodborne illnesses, which claim the lives of 3,000 Americans every year. It also calls out worthless dietary supplements [4] that don't have scientific evidence to back up the manufacturer's claims. It also gives some sensible advice on how to avoid certain (sneaky)
high-calorie foods. ACSH applauds CSPI for its crucial work on those issues.

Unfortunately, CSPI then contaminates its legitimately good public health advice with pure nonsense, such as rejecting evidence-based conclusions and advocating for a cancer warning label on meat [5]. Some of that nonsense was featured in a recent fundraising letter.

No, Sugar Substitutes Don’t Cause Cancer

CSPI repeats a whopper on the first page of its fundraising letter, where it claims that sugar substitutes like saccharin can cause cancer. That is a lie.

✔️ Sugar-free sweets: Can you have your cake and lose weight, too? Sugar-free foods are great for people who want the taste—but not the sugar—of cakes, cookies, ice cream, candies, and other sweets. But some sugar-free foods contain almost as many calories as non-sugar-free foods ... and not all artificial sweeteners are created equal: NutraSweet (the brand name for aspartame) and Sweet’N Low (which contains saccharin) may promote cancer, and sugar alcohols like sorbitol may cause diarrhea. On the other hand, Truvia (which contains stevia, as well as erythritol) appears to be safe.

We have covered this issue in depth for decades. In 2015, we published the 2nd edition [6] of Sugar Substitutes & Your Health, a guide to the eight FDA-approved sugar substitutes (acesulfame-K, advantame, aspartame, Luo Han Guo fruit extracts, neotame, saccharin, stevia, and sucralose). They are safe. In fact, it has been known since the 1970s that saccharin does not cause cancer, but the myth still exists nearly 50 years later.

No, Healthy Fruits Aren’t Contaminated with Pesticides

Taking a page out of the Environmental Working Group’s playbook [7], CSPI also claims that extremely healthy foods, like strawberries and blueberries, are contaminated with pesticides.

- You know you should eat lots of fruit—but which are the most nutritious? (Guava, watermelon, kiwi, papaya.) And which are among those most likely to be contaminated with pesticides? (Strawberries, peaches, apples, blueberries.) Nutrition Action tells you about the healthiest fruits, vegetables, beans, meats, and grains.

This is pure nonsense. There is nothing to fear from the trace amount of pesticides [8] used on fruits and vegetables. By scaring people into avoiding conventionally grown produce (or into paying for more expensive organic produce -- which still contains pesticides [9]), they are discouraging the public from consuming healthy food. That is utterly irresponsible.

No, Food Additives Don’t Cause Cancer

CSPI wants to warn people against "unsavory food additives," particularly ones that cause cancer.
As a reader of *Nutrition Action*, you’ll get 100% of the helpful information we reveal—all the facts, not just the tip of the iceberg reported by the national media. **Coming up:** Eye-opening revelations about popular restaurant foods, cancer-causing additives, dietary supplement scams, and links between diet and disease. It’s information you don’t want to be without!

CSPI is being intentionally vague, so it’s difficult to know exactly to what they are referring. But the American Cancer Society says [10] that new food additives (which are often used to prolong shelf life or enhance color, flavor, or texture) have to be cleared by the FDA. The ACS also notes that additives are usually present in tiny amounts, so avoiding them is unlikely to appreciably lower a person’s cancer risk.

The fundraising letter contains other dubious claims, such as scaremongering over too much sodium in an Olive Garden meal. But what is particularly infuriating is that a medical doctor, CSPI President Peter Lurie, signed off on this garbage.

It seems that, "First, do no harm," has been replaced with, "First, raise some money."

---

**CopyRight © 1978-2016 By the American Council on Science and Health**

**Source URL:** https://www.acsh.org/news/2019/12/30/cspi-fundraising-letter-full-biomedical-misinformation-14481

**Links**