

Olestra Redux

By ACSH Staff — October 25, 2004

One thing that you can say about the folks at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) -- they're certainly tenacious about their food vendettas! Once a food or ingredient has made the CSPI hate list, it's apparently there forever, whether or not any scientific evidence supports their viewpoint. A case in point is the CSPI crusade against olestra, the fat replacement ingredient that is used in potato chips and other savory snack foods.

In case you don't recall, olestra is a fat replacer made from sugar and fatty acids. It has the "mouthfeel" of regular fats, but since the body can't break it down, it supplies no calories. The FDA studied olestra for over twenty years and examined research on both animals and humans before approving its use in 1996. Of course, CSPI kicked and screamed and warned of the supposed dire consequences of consuming olestra.

The folks at CSPI were so concerned that they set up part of their website so that people who thought they were harmed by olestra could have a place to vent. Then, CSPI sent all these unconfirmed reports of adverse effects to the FDA. Among the research that CSPI chose to ignore, however, was a study indicating that minor gastrointestinal upsets were very common among American -- even those who never ate [olestra](#) [1]. They also ignored [studies](#) [1] indicating that in controlled trials, people who ate olestra-containing chips had no more GI upsets than those who ate regular chips. But what's a little science to confirmed olestra-haters?

When olestra-containing foods were first marketed, the FDA mandated that they carry a warning label about the possibility of GI effects and the risk olestra might prevent absorption of some fat-soluble vitamins from foods consumed at the same time. In 2003, however, because of the research indicating that olestra did not typically cause GI problems, the FDA removed the requirement for a warning label. Manufacturers still add vitamins A, D, E and K to foods made with olestra.

After all that, one might think that the issue was settled. But not so. Recently Frito-Lay announced a name change for some of their olestra products -- for example, their Wow chips will now be called Light. One would assume that this change reflects the fact that chips cooked in olestra have fewer calories than those cooked in regular oils. If used appropriately, such reduced-calorie snacks could help people who regularly consume chips to reduce calories, and possibly help combat Americans' weight problems.

But that possibility doesn't faze CSPI. This morning, they again revved up their anti-olestra campaign, and are sending more unconfirmed reports of olestra damage to the FDA. One can only hope that the FDA will attend to more serious matters, like the availability of flu vaccine, before paying attention to yet another scientifically unfounded complaint from CSPI.

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Note: In other fat-politics news, the Atkins company is now arranging to push its popular but controversial diet in schools, [reports](#) ^[2] the L.A. Times.

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