Olestra as Treatment for Dioxin: Flushing One Feared Chemical with Another

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Scientists may have some hope to offer newly elected Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko in his efforts to combat his reported recent dioxin poisoning. It's not a freshly discovered wonder drug. It's not an all-natural diet of organic fresh fruits and vegetables. Indeed, Yushchenko's relief may come in the form of potato chips.

A study published this month by researchers at the University of Cincinnati and the University of Western Australia demonstrates the ability of olestra, the calorie-free fat replacement used in such products as Fat-free Pringles, to speed the process of eliminating dioxin and similar chemicals from animals' bodies.

Which leads us to wonder what will be the response of groups, such as the food police at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, who have long vilified olestra for its potential to cause gastrointestinal problems (a concern discredited by numerous scientific organizations and the FDA) and vilified dioxin for its ability to cause cancer in humans (an unsubstantiated concern, given that studies only show carcinogenicity in rodents, and only at high doses of dioxin exposure). Doesn't acknowledging the efficacy of using one "poison" to flush out another violate the scaremonger code of ethics?

Yet the evidence supporting the use of olestra for this purpose is compelling. Dioxin (like other similar contaminants) is so lipophilic (attracted to fat) it will dissolve in fatty material in the gastrointestinal tract. Since olestra is such a material, it will carry dioxin out of the body, along with other fat-loving compounds. Thus, researchers have latched onto the idea of replacing fat in the diet with olestra in order to remove dioxin from the body faster. In 2001, the National Institutes of Environmental Health Science announced that olestra was effective in treating two women who had extremely high levels of dioxin exposure, and subsequent research has confirmed these results. This month's Cincinnati/Australia study is only the latest in a list of research projects touting this benefit of olestra consumption. (We don't suggest, though, that everyone start loading up on olestra to counteract the effects of environmental dioxin exposure -- the average person's exposure is low enough to warrant no action whatsoever.)

Of course, we're still waiting for alarmist groups to admit that the average person has no need to worry about either olestra or dioxin. In the meantime, we'll settle for an acknowledgement that the best antidote to one of their most hated chemicals might be the consumption of another.

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