Top 10 Reasons Not To Put Cancer Warnings on Fries and Chips

By ACSH Staff — September 21, 2005

For the past three years -- ever since Swedish scientists found the chemical acrylamide in food (particularly in high-starch foods cooked at elevated temperatures) -- there has been chatter among journalists and environmental advocates about the possible cancer risk of this chemical and the need to alert consumers to the possible dangers associated with eating French fries and chips.

Now the newspaper of record -- the New York Times -- has made the story national news with its Business Day story "A Fright Over Fries: California Wants to Serve a Health Warning with that Order." The article details the efforts of California Attorney General Bill Lockyer to require companies like McDonald's, Burger King, Frito-Lay, and six other food companies to put labels on all fries and potato chips sold in California, alerting potential eaters that the product contains "a chemical known to the state of California to cause cancer." The suit filed by the California AG stems from a 1986 state regulation called "Prop 65," which requires labels on all products containing chemicals that cause cancer in high dose animal studies, or, as the regulation puts it, all products "known to the state of California to cause cancer."

Putting warning labels on acrylamide-containing foods would be a scientific/medical travesty and should be rejected. Here's why:

#1. There is no credible evidence whatsoever that the presence of acrylamide poses a human cancer risk.

#2. Labeling potato products may deter people from eating them -- but there is no evidence that it will prevent even one case of human cancer.

#3. Acrylamide in food has been present since humans began cooking food. It has always been there, has never posed a problem, and is of no health significance.

#4. The argument that acrylamide poses a cancer risk is based exclusively on the results of high-dose rodent experiments. These studies are conducted using astronomical doses, and the results have no relevance to human risk.
#5. Labeling fried potato products as "cancer-causing" because of the presence of acrylamide opens the door to requiring labels on myriad foods -- because acrylamide is found in bread, cereal, pretzels, English muffins, roasted peanuts, fried fish, cocoa powder, black olives, coffee, pizza, and more. Microwaving a grated potato for only two minutes results in an average acrylamide content slightly higher than that in French fried potatoes. To be consistent, we would have to label a full spectrum of foods as "cancer-causing," which is absurd.

#6. Singling out acrylamide as a cancer risk would open a Pandora's box of labels on naturally-occurring carcinogens. Nature abounds in chemicals that cause cancer at high dose in animal tests, including the hydrazines in mushrooms, the safrole in black pepper, and aflatoxins in peanut products. If we were to label every food containing something that causes cancer in rodents, few foods would be spared. A supermarket, with everything labeled, might as well have "abandon all hope ye who enter here" emblazoned on its welcome mat.

#7. The decision of the California AG to single out potato chips and fries for cancer labels strongly suggests that this effort is more a politically-driven attack on so-called "junk food" than an effort to protect people from animal carcinogens -- otherwise, the legal mandate for warning labels would have to be far broader.

#8. Legal action against food manufacturers and regulations requiring labels translates into increased costs for consumers. As food companies scramble to reduce acrylamide levels -- to protect us from risks that do not exist -- we can expect a decline in food quality, particularly as cooking temperatures are lowered. This might actually increase the risk of foodborne diseases.

#9. The proposed labels are yet another effort to scare people away from a generally safe food supply. The acrylamide scare will soon become part of the history of scares (cranberries in 1959, cyclamates in 1969, saccharin in 1977, alar in 1989, etc.), but in the meantime one of the pleasures of life -- eating tasty food -- will be once again threatened. Even fries and chips, when eaten in moderation, can be part of a healthy, varied diet.

#10. All the "cancer prevention" efforts focused on reducing exposure to acrylamide only serve to distract us from the real cancer threats around us, ones that are well within our control: cigarette smoking, overexposure to sunlight, a diet deficient in fruits and vegetables, and overconsumption of calories in general.

Here's a more useful warning: carcinogen labels on fries and chips is an extremely bad idea.

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