

Science Panel Says Holiday Feasts Full of Natural Carcinogens

By ACSH Staff — November 14, 2005

New York, NY -- November 14, 2005. Scientists associated with the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) once again present an analysis of the natural foods that make up a traditional holiday dinner. Results indicate that our favorite foods are loaded with chemicals that can cause cancer in laboratory animals when administered in very high doses -- but none of these "carcinogens" are manmade or added to the foods. Instead, they occur naturally. But ACSH scientists have good news: these natural "carcinogens" pose no hazard to human health -- nor, for that matter, do manmade ones.

"The widespread presence of natural carcinogens in our food is clear evidence of why trace levels of manmade chemicals that cause cancer in lab animals should not be a concern," notes Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, president of ACSH.

Much of the concern about the health effects of chemicals stems from the indiscriminate application of the so-called Delaney Clause of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. As ACSH's [Holiday Dinner Menu](#) [1] -- a publication listing natural carcinogens in a typical holiday meal -- explains, the Delaney clause originally banned from American foods any artificial substance, whether pesticide residue or food additive, that could be shown to cause cancer in lab animals, no matter how minuscule the amount found in the human food supply or how high the dose given to the animals.

Over the years, the Delaney Clause has triggered regulatory action against a number of chemicals, including food colors and the artificial sweeteners cyclamates and saccharin. These compounds are animal carcinogens at high doses but are not suspected of causing human cancer. (Saccharin escaped a Delaney-instigated ban by the Food and Drug Administration only through an act of Congress.)

Usually, the chemicals examined by regulators were synthetic, since it was assumed that only manmade substances would cause cancer in laboratory animals. This, in fact, is not the case. Toxicologists have confirmed that natural chemicals, too, can be animal carcinogens when administered in high doses.

"If the Delaney clause were applied to the carcinogens that occur naturally in our foods, we would have to ban much of our holiday dinner -- and the rest of the foods we eat all year," adds Dr. Whelan. It should not be assumed that man-made chemicals are any more dangerous than natural chemicals.

The Food Quality Protection Act of 1996 was a glimmer of light at the end of the regulatory tunnel. The act exempts pesticides from the "zero risk" provisions of the Delaney Clause and demands

instead a new standard of "reasonable certainty of no harm." Unfortunately, the new bill leaves standing the application of the Delaney Clause's zero-risk standard to food additives, which still must pass this scientifically insupportable threshold.

ACSH's [Holiday Dinner Menu](#) [1] highlights the chemicals -- and the carcinogens -- that Mother Nature herself has put in our food. These natural carcinogens, by and large, have been shown to cause cancer only in very high doses given over a lifetime to lab animals. These chemicals are present in such small amounts in our food that they do not endanger consumers. This fact hasn't dampened the ardor of self-styled consumer activists, who "warn" consumers about the supposed dangers of, for example, acrylamide, which is produced naturally when carbohydrate-rich foods are cooked at high temperatures. "Acrylamide, like the majority of the other rodent carcinogens listed in the menu, has never been shown to be a human carcinogen," observed ACSH nutrition director Dr. Ruth Kava.

The American Council on Science and Health strongly endorses the progress Congress has made thus far in removing pesticides from the purview of Delaney, and ACSH urges Congress to continue to apply common sense and scientific reasoning to our food-protection programs. Says Dr. Whelan: "We must continue the progress we have made in changing our food laws -- and particularly the Delaney Clause -- to bring them into line with scientific reality. Removing the Delaney Clause entirely from our food safety laws would be highly desirable and consistent with our modern-day understanding of food technology and toxicology."

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