FDA Must Move to Safeguard Food Supply: Approve Irradiation of Produce!

By ACSH Staff — February 12, 2007

February 12, 2007, New York, NY— Does anyone at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ever watch the PBS program “The News Hour?” They certainly should—on February 8 the program’s segment on food irradiation gave ample reason for the agency to approve irradiation of produce to kill illness-causing (pathogenic) bacteria.

A decade ago, the usual culprits for bacteria-related food-borne illness were foods such as meat and poultry. There were numerous outbreaks of illness—and indeed some deaths—from foods contaminated by E. coli, salmonella and campylobacter, to name just a few. Of late, however, we have seen E. coli contamination of plant-derived foods such as alfalfa sprouts, green onions, and most recently spinach and lettuce. Since these foods are consumed raw, there is no opportunity to kill bacteria with heat, and washing doesn’t remove bacteria that the plants may have taken up from contaminated soils. But irradiation can kill such bacteria—without significantly altering the foods.

Anti-technology activists have fomented unwarranted fears about irradiation, ranging from concerns that the process will make foods radioactive (it doesn’t) to charges that food producers will not keep their facilities clean if they know their foods will be irradiated for safety. This latter concern is really old—it was a charge made against the introduction of heat pasteurization to kill bacteria in milk back in the 1920s. It wasn’t true of dairies, and it won’t be true of other food producers either.

Irradiation technology has been used in the U.S. for decades to sterilize products ranging from baby bottle nipples to surgeons’ gloves—the process is well understood and well-controlled. There is no danger to workers or to the community in which irradiators are located.

In order for produce purveyors to use irradiation to safeguard their products, a petition to allow such a use must be submitted to and approved by the FDA. Such a petition has been languishing at the FDA for six years, according to information presented in the PBS report.

ACSH applauds PBS for presenting accurate information about the utility and safety of food irradiation. At a time when most public health experts are encouraging Americans to consume more plant-based foods, it is increasingly important to make sure that such food is as safe as possible. The ball is in the FDA’s court—irradiation to protect the safety of produce should be approved without further delay.

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