Eat Fruits -- Oh, Wait, Not Those Fruits

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Be afraid, be very afraid, if you love to eat prunes or dried pears -- at least if you believe the hype about naturally occurring acrylamide in foods being a real risk to human health. Swiss scientists reported at a symposium held by the American Chemical Society that acrylamide can be found in some dried fruits. Since 2002, when Swedish scientists discovered that acrylamide is formed in carbohydrate-containing food cooked at high temperatures, there has been a concerted effort to scare consumers about foods such as French fries and potato chips. Some self-styled consumer advocates have pontificated for years about the dangers of such foods -- which they love to hate and have been demonizing enthusiastically.

They may have a problem, however, with this latest news -- after all, most nutrition experts suggest that Americans increase their consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products. And many of these obviously healthful products -- whole wheat bread in addition to dried fruits, for example -- are bound to contain acrylamide.

Truth be told, there's just no evidence that acrylamide at the levels found in foods [1] presents either a toxic or carcinogenic hazard to people. The evidence against acrylamide is based on high-dose animal studies or high-dose exposures in occupational settings -- not on typical exposures in foods.

California regulators should be warned that if they insist on putting a Proposition 65 warning on prunes and dried pears, they may have to label many other foods that contain minuscule levels of substances that cause cancer (at high doses in rodents, that is). Which of the many naturally-occurring animal carcinogens in our foods [2] would be next on their list? Would it be the hydrazines in mushrooms, the benzaldehyde in cherry tomatoes, the safrole from nutmeg in pumpkin pie?

Our increasing knowledge about the widespread natural occurrence of acrylamide in a wide variety of foods should reassure us that it's nothing to be scared about.

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