

One burger medium-well and irradiated, please!

By ACSH Staff — June 20, 2011

ACSH staffers this morning lauded *Los Angeles Times* writer Elena Conis for her comprehensive and informative [article](#) ^[1] on the many benefits of food irradiation, an effective yet underused method of preventing food-borne infection that has been around for the last century. Using low-dose X-rays, electron beams, or gamma rays, food irradiation has the potential to protect a wide variety of products, including produce and meat, and kills toxigenic *E. coli* as well.

Even though neither the electron-beams nor X-rays used in food irradiation contain radioactive elements, all irradiated food must be labelled with an international symbol called a radura (designated by a flower enclosed in a dashed circle). This is so because Congress deemed irradiation a food additive instead of a treatment process in the 1950s. Nevertheless, it is still used to sanitize one third of the spices currently used in U.S. commercial production, as well as 35 million pounds of imported tropical produce, such as mangoes, guavas, and papayas.

Published in the journal *Emerging Infectious Disease*, a 2001 analysis found that more than 880,000 cases of illnesses, 8,500 hospitalizations, and 352 deaths would be prevented annually if half of the meat and poultry consumed in the U.S. were irradiated.

Unfortunately, the process is prohibited on organic produce, which not coincidentally was the source of the recent *E. coli* outbreak in Europe.

If it has such great potential to reduce food-borne illnesses, why isn't food irradiation used more widely? Patrick Wall, professor of public health and a food safety expert at University College Dublin in Ireland, chalks it up to consumer fears. People hear irradiation and they think of Chernobyl, he says. But after reviewing over four decades of studies on irradiated foods, a 1998 report by the WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and the International Atomic Energy Agency concluded that these foods were safe and equal in nutrient content to other foods.

Indeed, concerns over irradiated foods are false and, sadly, trumped up by anti-technology groups to scare consumers which they have unfortunately accomplished, laments ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

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[1] <http://www.latimes.com/health/la-he-food-irradiation-20110619,0,3891910.story>