Thirty-two years later Aspartame is still safe (duh)

By ACSH Staff — December 11, 2013

In the no news is no news department, one of the most studied chemicals ever - Aspartame, NutraSweet - has gotten a clean bill of health from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). It’s about time. But will it matter?

Since its discovery in 1965 and FDA approval in 1981, the artificial sweetener has undergone such rigorous scrutiny that one would think soft drink companies were trying to put plutonium in their drinks.

It has also been the poster child for conspiracy theories and phony scares, many of which have been the product of consumer groups, radical environmental groups and various other fringe conspiracy theorists.

Speaking of which, ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom notes that The infamous Dr. Joseph Mercola, who has the scientific credibility of plankton, has a piece[2] on his website entitled Aspartame: By Far the Most Dangerous Substance Added to Most Foods Today. Dr. Bloom continues, I’m guessing he mistakenly wrote most instead of least, an honest editing error that almost anyone could make. But you might want to keep this in mind when you are considering purchasing the hundreds of (mostly unapproved) supplements that he has for sale on the same site.

The nonsense about aspartame may go on forever, but facts are facts. For example, aspartame is so safe that is impossible to find a lethal dose in acute rodent toxicity models. So, an estimate must be used, and this value is greater than 2 grams per day in rats. Although cross-species toxicity measurements are not terribly reliable, they do have some predictive value. Doing the math, the rat could drink 12 cans of diet soda, and, while it might drown, the amount of aspartame wouldn’t do a thing.

One of the major knocks about aspartame is that it breaks down to give small quantities of methanol, which is toxic in sufficient quantities. But methanol is naturally ubiquitous in food found in fruit, juices and wine. It has been estimated, for example, that tomato juice contains four to six-times more methanol than the same amount of an aspartame-sweetened beverage.

So, if you want to cut back on your sugar, pop open a can of a diet drink, and sleep easy at night.