How sweet it isn’t: Media reporting on HFCS leaves much to be desired.

By ACSH Staff — February 6, 2014

Who can consumers trust for information on health and nutrition? It seems that the news media is not in the running at least that’s the indication of a new study [1] by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) at George Mason University.

Although the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND), formerly the American Dietetics Association, concluded that table sugar and high fructose corn syrup are essentially the same in composition and metabolic effects, you’d be hard pressed to tell that from the news coverage of the topic, according to the CMPA.

The CMPA’s investigation covered 567 news stories in 120 news outlets. These were sourced during eleven one-month periods between 2004 and 2013 when there was significant news coverage about health effects of HFCS. This coverage involved about 1500 statements about the health effects of nutritive sweeteners.

Among other results, CMPA found that:

Â· HFCS was portrayed as either a proven or suspected cause of obesity or other adverse health effect 37 or 46 percent of the time respectively.

Â· They found that when reviewing research reports that either criticized or defended HFCS, over 90 percent of the coverage was of the critical reports.

Â· Seventy-one percent of coverage of HFCS argued the opposite from the AND’s conclusions about HFCS in 2012.

Â· Most reporting on new studies of HFCS didn’t mention important details of the studies such as whether the results were statistically significant, how the sample was selected, or whether there was a causal relationship between HFCS and observed health effects.

Overall, the CMPA concluded, The coverage placed news values above scientific values.

ACSH’s Dr Ruth Kava concurred We have unfortunately noticed on many occasions that media coverage of scientific and health topics leaves much to be desired. Like the AND, we have
evaluated the scientific literature and found [2] that HFCS is not different from table sugar in its effects on health. But it’s much more exciting, and headline-generating, to state the opposite.

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