Bowing to anti-science Zeitgeist, major food companies ditch safe and useful ingredients

By ACSH Staff — April 27, 2015

If you were to name some of the most studied and least dangerous chemicals commonly used in our foods, which would you select? Well, the artificial (non-nutritive) sweetener aspartame [1] (found ubiquitously in many foods, commonly known as Nutrasweet or Equal), should be among them. Nevertheless, PepsiCo announced [2] a few days ago that Diet Pepsi would no longer contain the substance, as they were switching to sucralose (found most commonly in Splenda) plus ace-K.

The move was attributed to declining Diet Pepsi sales in recent years. According to a Pepsi exec, as told to USA Today:

"To Diet Pepsi consumers, removing aspartame is their No. 1 concern," says Seth Kaufman, senior vice president of Pepsi and flavors, in a phone interview. "We're listening to consumers. It's what they want."

Our Dr. Josh Bloom pointed out what might happen when a company decides to eliminate one well-studied and long-used chemical and replace it with another, unknown substance, merely due to consumer concern, here [3].

ACSH s Dr. Gil Ross had this comment: Consumer fears about aspartame have been around since its initial approval over thirty years ago, fomented by numerous anti-chemical activists. Yet, no adverse human health effects have been reliably attributed to its typical use. ACSH has a publication set for release next month (see illustration) elaborating on these facts, and another recent publication touching on the sweetener [1].

On a similar note, the restaurant chain Chipotle, riding high on increasing sales and customer satisfaction of late, announced that, after 2 years of trying, they had finally eliminated all GMO-containing foods [4]. According to the Wall St. Journal, Non-GMO" is one of the fastest-growing label trends on U.S. food packages, with sales of such items growing an average of 13% a year since 2010 to more than $3 billion last year.

The Food and Drug Administration has approved a number of genetically modified crops, which proponents, including many science groups, argue are safe. Critics claim they cause a variety of...
environmental ills and could be harmful to human health. The skepticism is part of a wider backlash in recent years among consumers seeking simpler, more natural ingredients.

The effort involved substituting a non-GMO sunflower oil for a genetically modified soybean oil it had been using, and sourcing non-GMO tortillas. More than 90% of the corn and soy grown in the U.S. comes from genetically engineered seeds, making it difficult for big food companies to find enough beef or chicken that comes from animals given non-GMO feed. But as more U.S. farmers are motivated by the premium price they can get for non-GMO crops, the supply increases.

From Dr. Ross again: The phony debate about GMO foods and biotechnology in agriculture has, sadly, taken hold among the public despite the complete absence of any instance of harm from the millions of tons and acres of farmland planted with GMO crops since 1996. Besides this overwhelming empirical evidence, even theoretically, the fears are completely bogus, as this technology is, if anything, more precise and thereby safer than traditional crop breeding. Yet, again, we see major corporations fleeing from rather than taking the trouble to defend the science in this case and many others. The psychology of anti-GMO fear is nicely explained in this NPR piece [5], The Danger of GMO Food: Is It All in Your Mind? And for a solid science-grounded detailed discussion of GMOs, see ACSH’s publications here [6].

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