

Olestra: Science Seems to be Winning

By ACSH Staff — July 12, 1998

This week marks another watershed in the long running saga of olestra, the non caloric fat substitute. After 2 1/2 days of hearing new scientific evidence, the Food Advisory Committee of the FDA concluded that olestra is a safe product for use in savory snack foods chips, crackers and the like. This conclusion is a long awaited victory of science over hype and fear mongering.

Olestra underwent one of the most extensive testing programs of any food additive ever reviewed by the FDA before its use was approved in 1996 over twenty years of it. Approval was hard fought, since manufacturer Procter & Gamble and hopeful consumers had to overcome self styled consumer activists who presented distorted and incomplete data to frighten consumers and influence the regulatory process. Since approval, detailed post marketing surveillance and well designed scientific studies have demonstrated, however, that objections to the use of olestra were clearly without merit.

For example, much has been made of reports of gastrointestinal disturbances by people who consumed olestra containing snacks. The hype was that olestra would cause a national epidemic of diarrhea and soiled underwear. The truth is that GI disturbances are a common occurrence among the American populace. In a national sample of over 5,000 individuals, 69 percent reported having some degree of gastrointestinal distress in the previous three month period. It is likely that the connection was due more to widespread adverse media coverage than to any effect of olestra itself because well designed scientific studies have found no such connection. A recent study examined the effects of olestra snacks on the occurrence of GI symptoms in a placebo controlled, double blind test. There was no difference in the frequency of such symptoms in those who ate olestra snacks compared to those who ate indistinguishable full fat snacks.

Olestra opponents have also cited the fact that the fat substitute interferes with absorption of some fat soluble nutrients as a reason to forbid its use. In particular, the effects of olestra on blood carotene levels have been grossly exaggerated; public pronouncements often are misleading and based on a distortion of the scientific data. Published research reports that people consuming 8 grams of olestra (about the amount in an ounce of olestra containing chips) did indeed have decreased levels of carotenes in their blood. But the people in the study ate olestra at every meal, every day for eight weeks which the doom sayers never mention. This is not the typical pattern of consumption of salty snacks the only foods in which olestra may be used. A person eating an ounce or two of olestra fried chips, for example, would be unlikely to experience any change in blood carotene levels at all.

Further, there is no broad scientific consensus that carotenoids will prevent cancer or heart disease. The only large intervention studies to date on beta carotene, for example, failed to show any benefit (and perhaps some harm) in people taking this compound in supplements. It may well

be that blood levels of carotenes are simply a marker for intake of fruits and vegetables and there is a consensus that diets with ample supplies of such items are protective.

Finally, although opponents often speak of how olestra can deplete the body of these nutrients, what s really true that no matter how much olestra is consumed, it can only affect absorption of nutrients present in the GI tract at the same time. Olestra could in no way deplete previously existing blood levels of carotenoids, or of other fat soluble nutrients.

Happily for American consumers, the FDA committee paid attention to the science and not the hype and distortions. And Americans can now enjoy another of the benefits of modern food science.

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