

OT: Dietitians Say Splenda Is Not the Same as Sugar

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Lawsuits Put New Focus on Splenda and Other Artificial Sweeteners

By Colette Bouchez
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Courtroom battles between the makers of Splenda and Equal have many questioning the safety of artificial sweeteners.

Since early 2000 McNeil Nutritionals has been advertising that its product — Splenda — is "made from sugar so it tastes like sugar." But the National Sugar Association and Merisant Worldwide (maker of Equal brand sweetener) have challenged that claim in a lawsuit.

McNeil Nutritionals shot back with a counter suit implying the case against them was more about corporate sour grapes than truth in consumer advertising.

But court battles and corporate back stabbing aside, the question on consumers' minds is not so much whether advertising slogans are right or wrong, but do they really make a difference — at home, on the dinner table where it really counts?

Dietitian Nancy Restuccia, MS, RD, says they most definitely do. "Splenda is not sugar — and to piggyback it on to the reputation of the centuries' old profile of sugar is more than misleading, it could come back to haunt us, perhaps sooner than we think," says Restuccia, a nutritionist at the Center for Obesity Surgery at New York Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. Indeed, while there are currently only a

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handful of studies that question Splenda's safety and more than 100 which attest to its safe use, Restuccia says it simply hasn't been around long enough to amass any long-term data -- or even short-term data involving heavy consumption.

According to the manufacturer of Splenda, Johnson & Johnson/McNeil, since its introduction more than a decade ago, millions of people have safely eaten products made with sucralose -- which is the basis of Splenda.

J. Roberto Moran, MD, director of medical and nutritional affairs for McNeil Nutritionals LLC, says, "More than 80 countries have approved the use of sucralose in foods, including the United States FDA in 1998."

McNeil also says sucralose is one of the most tested food ingredients ever introduced and its safety has been confirmed by regulatory agencies around the world. Studies, he says, number more than 100 over a 20 year period, all demonstrating that sucralose has no harmful effects.

What Happens When Sweeteners Interact?

"Sugar may have its health drawbacks, but at least we know we're not in for any major surprises -- and we just can't say that about Splenda yet -- so to imply that it's got the same profile as sugar is misleading and that is important today, as well as in the long run," she says.

Samantha Heller, MS, RD, agrees. "Saying Splenda is made from sugar is like taking the round wheels off a car and putting on square wheels. Is it still a car? Yes. But can it still perform like a car? No -- and what's more we don't know what's going to happen when people try to 'drive it' cross country," says Heller.

Indeed, while Splenda starts out as sugar, some serious scientific tinkering goes on before it gets into your coffee. As Heller explains, this involves removing three atoms found in sugar and replacing them with three atoms of the chemical chlorine.

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But while all that may not matter much to your taste buds, experts say it takes on a new and more important meaning as plans roll out to include Splenda in a wide variety of treats, including more diet sodas, baked goods, and even processed foods.

"It's not like you're going to be using a teaspoon in your coffee once in a while — it's going to be everywhere, in everything, which makes it even more important for people to understand what they are and are not getting with this product," says Restuccia.

Also important to note: Experts say we have almost no data on the way in which artificial sweeteners interact with each other — particularly at high amounts. And that, says Restuccia may come back to haunt us even more.

"As more and more products are being made with artificial sweeteners, there is more likelihood that we will not only be consuming more of them but also mixing different ones, sometimes in a single meal — and we really have no idea what that means health wise, in the short or the long run," says Restuccia.

What About Other Artificial Sweeteners?

The FDA has approved five artificial sweeteners:

- a.. Acesulfame potassium (Sunett)
- b.. Aspartame (NutraSweet or Equal)
- c.. Sucralose (Splenda)
- d.. D-Tagatose (Sugaree)
- e.. Saccharin (Sweet 'N Low)

You may be surprised to see saccharin on that list. In the 1970s, the FDA was going to ban saccharin based on the reports of a Canadian study that showed that saccharin was causing bladder cancer in rats. A public outcry kept saccharin on the shelves (there were no other sugar substitutes at that time), but with a warning label that read, "Use of this product may be hazardous to your health. This product contains saccharin which has been determined to cause cancer in laboratory animals."

That warning label is no longer needed, says Ruth Kava, PhD, RD,

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director of nutrition for the American Council on Science and Health. Further research has shown that male rats have a particular pH factor that predisposes them to bladder cancer. "A lot of things that cause harm in animals don't always cause harm in humans," she says.

Like saccharin, aspartame is another artificial sweetener that — though thoroughly tested by the FDA and deemed safe for the general population — has had its share of critics who blame the artificial sweetener for causing everything from brain tumors to chronic fatigue syndrome.

Not so, says Kava.

The only people for whom aspartame is a medical problem are those with the genetic condition known as phenylketonuria (PKU), a disorder of amino acid metabolism. Those with PKU need to keep the levels of phenylalanine in the blood low to prevent mental retardation as well as neurological, behavioral, and dermatological problems. Since phenylalanine is one of the two amino acids in aspartame, people who suffer from PKU are advised not to use it.

Some people can be sensitive to artificial sweeteners and experience symptoms such as headaches and upset stomach, but otherwise, there is no credible information that aspartame — or any other artificial sweetener — causes brain tumors, or any other illness, says registered dietitian Wendy Vida, with HealthPLACE, the health and wellness division of Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield in Pittsburgh.

Kava says that since artificial sweeteners are so much sweeter than sugar, a very small amount is needed to achieve the same sweetness one gets from sugar. "If used normally, the amounts you take in are so minuscule as to be of no concern at all."

Another sweetener receiving much publicity of late is stevia, an herbal sweetening ingredient used in food and beverages by South American natives for many centuries and in Japan since the mid-1970s.

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According to Ray Sahelian, MD, author of The Stevia Cookbook, stevia has shown no significant side effects after more than 20 years of use in Japan.

"There are no indications at this point from any source that stevia has shown toxicity in humans," says Sahelian, though he agrees that further research is warranted.

Because stevia is not FDA-approved, it cannot be sold as an artificial sweetener; however it can be -- and is -- sold as a dietary supplement. Because these supplements are not regulated as well as those that have received FDA approval, and therefore have no guarantee of purity, Kava is leery about the use of stevia. "This is a product that's just asking for good research studies," she says. "We just don't know enough yet."

With reporting by Carol Sorgen.

SOURCES: Nancy Restuccia, MS, RD, Center for Obesity Surgery at NY Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center in New York City; Samantha Heller, MS, RD, senior clinical nutritionist at NYU Medical Center, New York City; Americans Opt for Sweetness and Lite, FDA Consumer, December, 2004; Use of Nutritive and Non-Nutritive Sweeteners, Position Paper, American Dietetic Association. WebMD Feature Archive: "The Truth on Artificial Sweeteners." J. Roberto Moran, MD, director of medical and nutritional affairs for McNeil Nutritionals LLC.

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