The aspartame debate is raging, due to the proposed inclusion of artificial and ‘diet’ sweeteners in school tuck shop food, and a number of severe reactions to aspartame recently reported in news headlines. Who to believe? The NZFSA says it’s safe, so your children could soon be downing copious quantities of the often Chinese-produced chemical. Fitness Life tracked down world expert Dr Woodrow Monte to tell the real story behind this potentially lethal lollipop.

Sickly sweet

By Dr Woodrow Monte

Abby Cormack is a young lady from Wellington, who recently made headlines because of serious adverse reactions attributed by her physician to her use of the artificial sweetener aspartame. She sent me an email asking for help. I was happy to assist, as I have seen hundreds of similar complaints over the years.

My name is Dr Woodrow Monte. My 26-year career as Professor of Food Science at Arizona State University was devoted to research, and lecturing on the composition and safety of foods. For 25 years, I have had serious concerns about the consequences of consuming aspartame. In 1983, I filed the first petition to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) seeking its removal from foods. My 287-page petition, containing copious documentation from published research, was denied without explanation. In 1984, I wrote the first scientific article warning of the effects of the methanol produced when aspartame is ingested.

The trouble is, the issue of aspartame safety is embedded in a quagmire of politics. Its approval by the FDA was championed by the former US secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld. At the time, he was president of the company that invented the chemical, and which stood to make considerable financial gain from its manufacture and sale.

Abby Cormack from Wellington, who recently made headlines because of severe adverse reactions attributed to her use of aspartame.

The science

Aspartame tastes sweet because of its attachment to a molecule of methanol or wood alcohol. This is very loosely bound and will fly off at the slightest heating or when the chemical is consumed. Methanol is a dangerous poison that, over time, is known to remove the insulation from nerve axons. Because its toxicity is well known, millions of dollars were invested by aspartame’s inventors in attempting to find some other, safer substance to attach it to, but they were not successful. So, with the approval of aspartame, a new source of methanol was added to the very short list of methanol-containing foods.

Why is methanol dangerous? Inside cells, it is converted to formaldehyde, an undetectable toxin and recognised cancer-causing agent, rated at the highest order (Group I) by the IARC International Agency for Research on Cancer. Even when formaldehyde is injected directly into a living human, it turns into formaldehyde, an aggressive molecule that instantly attaches to any protein molecule with which it makes contact. The formaldehyde molecule completely disappears under the cover of the much larger protein, which then loses function. No diagnostic procedures can detect a protein molecule so changed.

Based on the NZFSA’s recommendation, the New Zealand government is currently considering a measure that will promote diet sweeteners as a replacement for sugar-sweetened beverages in schools. Inexpensively produced aspartame from China is most likely to be selected to play that role. And the fizzy drink manufacturers are happy – they stand to reap a substantial profit from the money saved substituting aspartame for sugar.

What will be the likely cost to the public health, though? I have studied the scientific literature and, in the remainder of this article, will present my learnings and why I believe it is so important to reject this proposed measure.

NZFSA public relations and the beverage industry

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA) has endorsed aspartame safety in all its handouts, for the most part paraphrasing the claims of the sweetener industry. And, despite vigorous protest, it has maintained this pro-aspartame stance, at the same time choosing not to allocate resources to study the many hundreds of scientific works that comprise the methanol toxicity literature alone.

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protein are found on white blood cells called macrophages. Macrophages seek out and destroy these proteins at a rate 100 times faster than they do proteins not treated with formaldehyde.

Upon autopsy, macrophages have also been found in the damaged areas of the brains of those who have died from multiple sclerosis (MS). In fact, in German scientific literature, Swiss physician Dr Hugo Hergo, argues eloquently that naturally occurring methanol is the cause of MS.

Despite this, pharmaceutical companies use formaldehyde-treated viral proteins to greatly enhance antibody production during the manufacture of vaccines. However, the effect of this on human proteins has never been examined as a cause of autoimmune disorder.

A question never answered

In response to the kinds of concerns above, spokespersons for the soft drink industry and for the NZFSA claim that there is a large amount of methanol consumed in the normal diet, and that a ‘little more’ from aspartame will do no harm. This seems to be their only justification for allowing the use of methanol in foods and must always be packaged with a label showing a skull and crossbones; the universal symbol for poison.

Inexplicably, such data was presumed to support the term toxicity studies for aspartame showed no effect, but did not mention how much methanol was accidentally added. Also, research into aspartame safety cannot safely be generalised to humans. So, we have become the test subjects in a 27-year long experiment. Now, unfortunately, the damage to animals and therefore to us, can consume methanol. To just a little as two teaspoons can be lethal for a human. Since then, methanol itself has been forbidden in foods and must always be packaged with a label showing a skull and crossbones; the universal symbol for poison.

Another attempt to put methanol into foods

A hundred years ago, the scientific community believed methanol was benign and swore to its safety, with disastrous consequences. Over the previous 50 years, many toxicity studies performed in reputed laboratories had showed that more methanol than ethanol is required to kill a test animal. Recent work of this sort was repeated with monkeys, dogs, rabbits and laboratory rats, each time with the same result. Such data was presumed to support the safety of methanol consumption. However, the bond that holds the methanol to methanol studies. As a consequence, it did become the first additive in the history of the FDA to be denied approval for use in foods, by an expert panel of scientists. And its ultimate approval was not the result of additional research, but rather of political intervention.

What was remarkable, was the method used to bend science to the will of an aggressive drug firm. When it was clear that chances of approval were vanishing, representatives of the company sought out the few laboratories in the United States that were performing methanol research. These were, in effect, hired to prove aspartame was safe. They were asked to find an animal that would respond to the ingestion of methanol by methanol-containing products. Inexplicably, millions of dollars bought many scientific papers, few indicating that the research therein was ‘contracted’ by the manufacturers of the product. Those findings are now forever embedded in the scientific literature, and scientists who were on the corporate dole are now considered experts in the field of methanol safety.

It should be noted that research not funded by the manufacturer of aspartame has led to significantly different conclusions. For example, 10 years ago, an independent Spanish laboratory found that aspartame doses most definitely turns into formaldehyde.

Because of differences across species in the production of methanol from metabolisable carbohydrates, the results of animal research into aspartame safety cannot safely be generalised to humans. So, we have become the test subjects in a 27-year long experiment. Now, unfortunately, the damage that methanol can cause is being revealed in aspartame consumers such as Abby McCormick.

The issue is complex, but the choice is simple. Fortunately, there are several other readily available artificial sweeteners that do not contain dangerous toxins. And it just makes good sense to keep aspartame out of our foods.

You can visit TheTruthAboutStuff.com to view my 1984 article, for a full discussion of this issue and references for this article. Please also refer to Fitness Life’s article ‘Lethal Lollipop’ (page 89, Issue 14). What do you think about the aspartame debate? Email your thoughts to fit@fitnesslife.co.nz

Renowned for their indulgent lifestyle, the French retain their youthful appearance and energy whilst maintaining a suprisingly low rate of heart disease.