



‘Infoterrorism’ sours the taste of sweetener

Have you become an unknowing promoter of infoterrorism or possibly even bioterrorism? E-mail has made it easier than ever for an individual or a group to make you an unknowing accomplice.

Question: What do these terms mean?

Answer: Infoterrorism is related to the spreading of alarming information; bioterrorism to that which affects the body. Spreading alarming rumors about food safety is a type of bioterrorism.

If a person hears something repeatedly, the comment seems to take on a "truth" of its own, even when it is blatantly false. The Internet is proving to be the perfect medium for exponentially multiplying questionable health information until many people consider it truth.

Once something is accepted into a person's "truth" category, there is a natural tendency to share the "knowledge." It is also human nature to be disturbed when someone challenges your perception of the "truth."

People are concerned about chemicals with strange names being added to their foods. The Internet is full of sites exclaim-

ing that we are being poisoned by these food additives.

About 5,000 Web sites focus on the hazards of one additive: traces of a chemical called N-aspartylphenylalanine methyl ester that have been added to many foods since 1981. Web sites warn that this is a deadly poison that should be banned from foods. It has been blamed for everything from seizures to multiple sclerosis and Desert Storm Syndrome.

Q: What is N-aspartylphenylalanine methyl ester?

A: It is more commonly known as aspartame or by the brand name NutraSweet. It is about 180 times as sweet as sugar and is commonly used as a low-calorie sweetener in diet sodas.

Q: Is this a dangerous chemical for the body?

A: No. As far as the human body is concerned, aspartame is very much like a tiny piece of protein. When aspartame is digested, it breaks down to two amino acids that are found in all natural foods that contain protein and traces of a type of alcohol called methanol.

Q: Isn't methanol toxic to the body?

A: When consumed in significant amounts, methanol is toxic. But small amounts are produced in the body in the process of digesting many common foods. The body has no problem handling these small amounts.

Some fruit juices, for example, release three to five times as much methanol as aspartame-sweetened diet soda. Some alcoholic beverages such as brandy, whiskey and wine can provide even more. In fact, some researchers think the methanol in alcoholic drinks is at least partly responsible for hangovers. However, hangovers from diet sodas and fruit juices have not been reported.

Q: Is aspartame the cause of multiple sclerosis, as some have claimed?

A: No. Dr. David Squillacote, senior medical advisor of the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation, referred to these claims as "wild and inaccurate information" with no scientific rationale. After all, what caused M.S. prior to aspartame?

So be careful about forwarding bioterror e-mail, and make sure to get the facts before you worry needlessly.

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