



In Geoff's Words...

Soft drink makers' verbal promises not worth the paper they are printed on

In 1990, manufacturers were supposed to get the benzene out of their soft drinks. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which discovered the problem, never made it public because the US soft drinks association promised to “get the word out” and fix the benzene problem themselves.¹

The “word” to “get out” is **sodium benzoate**, a common preservative. In the presence of an acid it breaks down into several things, including benzene, a carcinogenic, highly regulated chemical. Unfortunately, many soft drinks are naturally acidic, especially fruit based ones that contain vitamin C (ascorbic acid). The remedy is simple if you know it: don't use sodium benzoate to preserve acidic drinks. But in Europe, Latin America and North America over 1,500 soft drink products containing sodium benzoate and either citric acid or ascorbic acid have been introduced since January 2002. In formulations like that the FDA has confirmed that benzene does form at parts per billion (ppb) levels.

Are parts per billion levels dangerous? Yes, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)². The safe level is zero ppb because anything above that is hazardous, although the maximum allowable level in drinking water is 5 ppb only because at the present time we can't reliably remove benzene any better than that. Some soft drinks tested by an independent lab show benzene levels at 10 ppb!

How dangerous? Short-term effects include temporary nervous system disorders, immune system depression, anemia, and long-term effects are chromosome aberrations and cancer. That's what you are risking when you consume a soft drink from an American or foreign source that didn't “get the word”.

Minutes from a meeting between FDA and the

National Soft Drinks Association in 1990-1 show FDA officials chose to protect soft drink manufacturers from “adverse publicity associated with this problem”. Instead of litigation, or legislation, they near-sightedly chose to trust the industry to “get the word out”. Legislation prohibiting sodium benzoate in acidic beverages would have served the public better, because although FDA tests in 1993 indicated the problem was gone, obviously the verbal solution did not last.

The FDA should not have covered up the benzene problem because their first duty is to citizens. These days, if a water district found benzene above 5 ppb the FDA would require them to “notify the public via newspapers, radio, TV and other means. Additional actions, such as providing alternative drinking water supplies, may be required to prevent serious risks to public health.”

I suppose we should be thankful that, at least today, we are getting an investigation rather than a private deal with vested interests.

Good old milk often unfairly accused

Even without the possibility of benzene pollution, soft drinks are not a healthy choice. Virtually devoid of nutrients, adults get 14% of their daily calories from soft drinks (which includes “fruit” drinks with less than 10% fruit juice).³ These drinks have surpassed white bread as the largest calorie source.

When you try to switch your kids to milk, however, you may run into gastrointestinal complaints. A Finnish study indicates cow's milk is usually not the cause. The cause is more often a different food allergy.⁴ So it's worth giving milk a second look.

Cost of shipping rising

Although for years we have resisted any significant increase to our shipping charges, the rising price of fuel has caused sharp increases by the US Postal Service and United Parcel Service, which we can no longer afford to ignore. New rates effective June 12.

¹ <http://www.foodnavigator.com/news/ng.asp?n=65840-soft-drinks-fda-benzene>

² http://www.epa.gov/safewater/contaminants/dw_contamfs/benzene.html

³ <http://www.sciencenews.org/articles/20050618/food.asp>

⁴ http://www.ucsfhealth.org/childrens/health_library/reuters/2005/12/20051214elin002.html