

US urged to set standards for arsenic in rice

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(AP)—The U.S. Food and Drug Administration may consider new standards for the levels of arsenic in rice as consumer groups are calling for federal guidance on how much of the carcinogen can be present in food.

So far, FDA officials say they have found no evidence that suggests rice is unsafe to eat. The agency has studied the issue for decades but is in the middle of conducting a new study of 1,200 samples of grocery-store rice products—short and long-grain rice, adult and baby cereals, drinks and even rice cakes—to measure arsenic levels.

Rice is thought to have arsenic in higher levels than most other foods because it is grown in water on the ground, optimal conditions for the contaminant to be absorbed in the rice. There are no federal standards for how much arsenic is allowed in food.

Arsenic is naturally present in water, air, food and soil in two forms, organic and inorganic. According to the FDA, organic arsenic passes through the body quickly and is essentially harmless. Inorganic arsenic—the type found in some pesticides and insecticides—can be toxic and may pose a cancer risk if consumed at high levels or over a long period.

How much organic and inorganic arsenic rice eaters are consuming, and whether those levels are dangerous, still remains to be seen.

FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg says consumers should not stop

eating rice, though she does encourage a diverse diet just in case.

"Our advice right now is that consumers should continue to eat a balanced diet that includes a wide variety of grains—not only for good nutrition but also to minimize any potential consequences from consuming any one particular food," she said.

The agency on Wednesday released 200 of an expected 1,200 samples after the magazine Consumer Reports released its own study and called for federal standards for arsenic in rice. The FDA will not complete its study until the end of the year, Hamburg said, and cannot draw any conclusions from the results until then.

Both studies show relatively similar levels of arsenic in rice. The FDA's analysis, including 200 samples, showed average levels of 3.5 to 6.7 micrograms of inorganic arsenic per serving. Consumer Reports, with 223 samples, found levels up to 8.7 micrograms. That is roughly equivalent to one gram of arsenic in 115,000 servings of rice.

It is almost impossible to say how dangerous these levels are without a benchmark from the federal government. Consumer Reports uses New Jersey's drinking water standard—a maximum of 5 micrograms in a liter of water—as comparison because it is one of the strictest in the country. But it is unclear how accurate it is to compare arsenic levels in water and arsenic levels in rice—most people consume more water than rice, so drinking water standards may need to be tougher.

It is because of this uncertainty that consumer groups have urged the FDA to set a standard.

Urvashi Rangan of Consumer Reports says the group is not trying to alarm rice eaters and parents feeding their children rice, but to educate them so they can diversify their diets. Consumers should be more

protected since arsenic is a known carcinogen and could build up in the body over time, she said.

"It doesn't make sense not to have standards for rice," she said.

The Consumer Reports study found higher levels of arsenic in brown rice than white rice, a result of how the two different types are processed. It also found higher levels in rice produced in Southern U.S. states than in rice from California or Asia.

Rice growers jumped on the report. A statement from the industry group USA Rice Federation said that U.S. rice growers do not use pesticides with arsenic.

"We understand that 'arsenic' is an alarming word, but we believe it is important for consumers to know that arsenic is a naturally occurring element in our air, water, rocks and soil," the group said in a statement. "This is how plants uptake arsenic. As a result, it's always been in the food supply and is in many healthy foods that are consumed by billions of people every day."

Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan joined with Consumer Reports Wednesday, also calling on FDA to set standards, particularly for baby food. She, like the magazine, urged parents to limit the amount of rice they feed their children.

The FDA was not willing to go that far, however. Hamburg cautioned that neither the FDA nor Consumer Reports had tested enough samples to be certain of any trend.

"These are very few samples and there is great variability in the levels," she said.

Scientists have known for decades that arsenic is present in rice, but the issue has renewed interest as consumers are more interested than ever in what they eat and technology has advanced to the point that inorganic and organic arsenic can be measured separately.

The consumer group's push on arsenic in rice comes a year after it pressured the FDA to define standards for arsenic in apple juice. Michael Taylor, the FDA's deputy commissioner for foods, said Tuesday that the agency had completed an assessment on apple juice and would be making recommendations soon. The levels of arsenic found in apple juice are low, he said.

Professor Jaymie R. Meliker of Stony Brook University, who has studied the effects of arsenic, says it's all a matter of moderation.

"In general, in life, you shouldn't stand out in the sun eight hours a day," he said. "You shouldn't eat rice exclusively every meal. You should introduce variety in your diet because there are contaminants in everything. Nothing is completely safe."

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