

California may slap cancer warning on coffee, but should java lovers panic?

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(HealthDay)—A lawsuit working its way through California's courts

could mean that the Golden State's coffee shops might have to post cancer warnings for the beloved beverage.

But cancer and toxicology experts say that's no reason to avoid your morning cup of Joe.

The lawsuit, first filed in the Los Angeles County Superior Court in 2010, was brought against a number of companies by a nonprofit group called the Council for Education and Research on Toxics (CERT), *CNN* reported Wednesday.

The suit alleges that chains such as Starbucks and 7-Eleven "failed to provide clear and reasonable warning" to patrons that coffee contains levels of a suspected carcinogen known as acrylamide.

Acrylamide is a chemical that's often linked to cooked foods, such as French fries, baked goods and breakfast cereals. But the science on its cancer-causing potential has been mixed.

According to *CNN*, in 2002 the International Agency for Research on Cancer classed acrylamide as a group 2A carcinogen for humans, based on animal research. But a 2014 review published in the *Journal of Nutrition and Cancer* said that human trials have so far found "no statistically significant association between dietary acrylamide intake and various cancers."

Still, CERT believes the evidence is sufficient to warrant signs being posted in California [coffee shops](#) warning customers of the potential danger.

But what are those dangers, if any?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says it is "still in the

information-gathering stage" when it comes to acrylamide. And two experts on food and [cancer risk](#) said there's certainly no need for coffee lovers to panic.

"Acrylamide is one of the most commonly found contaminants in food," explained Dr. Ken Spaeth, chief of environmental medicine at Northwell Health in Manhasset, N.Y. "It is created when carbohydrates —starchy foods—are baked, fried, roasted or toasted. Relatively high concentrations of acrylamide can be found in everyday items such as coffee, bread and French fries."

That said, "the full extent of any cancer risk from acrylamide is currently not clear," Spaeth added. And he noted that other studies have supported coffee's real benefits to health.

"The situation with coffee is muddied by the fact that there is evidence that regular coffee drinking may be *protective* against certain types of cancer, which is theorized to be a result of the high levels of antioxidants in coffee," Spaeth said.

The bottom line is that "more research needs to be done to better understand the risk and whether specific limits or regulatory standards are warranted regarding acrylamide," he added.

Dr. Stephanie Bernik, chief of surgical oncology at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, agreed.

She stressed that the only studies linking acrylamide to cancer were done "in lab rats and may not translate to the human population."

And she agreed with Spaeth that "there have been studies showing the beneficial effects of coffee, so even if [acrylamide] remains, the good effects of coffee may overshadow any negative effects."

Indeed, Raphael Metzger, the attorney representing CERT in the California lawsuit, said he loves coffee—he and his group just want it to be manufactured in a potentially less toxic way.

"I'm addicted to coffee, I confess, and I would like to be able to have mine without [acrylamide](#)," Metzger told *CNN*.

"We have a huge cancer epidemic in this country, and about a third of cancers are linked to diet," he said. "To the extent that we can get carcinogens out of the food supply, logically, we can reduce the [cancer](#) burden in this country. That's what this is all about."

In the meantime, 13 of the defendants in the lawsuit have settled and agreed to post the [coffee](#) warnings in their outlets, the latest to do so being 7-Eleven. Final mediation on the case is set for Feb. 8, Metzger said, and a judge is scheduled to reach a final decision on the lawsuit sometime in 2018, according to *CNN*.

More information: Ken Spaeth, M.D., chief, occupational and environmental medicine, Northwell Health, Manhasset, N.Y.; Stephanie Bernik, M.D., chief, surgical oncology, Lenox Hill Hospital, New York City; *CNN*

Find out more about acrylamide at the [U.S. National Cancer Institute](#).

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