



Is mercury lurking in high-fructose corn syrup?

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Maybe you were beginning to believe that high-fructose corn syrup wasn't so bad.

After all, it meets the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's definition of "natural," and isn't it okay to eat all foods in moderation?

Unfortunately, we don't consume HFCS in "moderation." The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates Americans ingest about 12 teaspoons of it each day. The American Medical Association recommends limiting all added sweeteners to no more than 8 teaspoons per day.

One 20-ounce soda alone delivers 17 teaspoons. Add in the HFCS in baked goods, sports drinks, jams, barbecue sauces, ketchup, syrups, frozen dairy products and more. Moderation? You do the math.

Moderation becomes even harder to swallow when foods are contaminated with deadly bacteria or heavy metals.

Research published in the Jan. 26 issue of Environmental Health now gives corn refiners and consumers something else to worry about: the possible presence of mercury, a known neurotoxin, in HFCS.

How does mercury get into HFCS? Some processors use mercury-grade caustic soda to separate corn starch from the corn kernel. Most processing plants have switched to mercury-free technologies, but some have not; we have no way of knowing how the HFCS in our food was produced.

But here's where the story gets sticky. Back in 2005, under the direction of environmental health officer Renee Dufault, researchers found detectable levels of mercury in nine out of 20 samples of HFCS. However, FDA ignored the results, and journals didn't print the story, until now.

Now the Corn Refiners Association says the Environmental Health article is outdated and HFCS manufacturers "stopped using" mercury in HFCS production "years ago."



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Hmm. That's odd — the Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy conducted its own small, regional study in 2008 and confirmed Dufault's findings. IATP tested 55 name-brand food and beverage products where HFCS was the first or second-highest ingredient. They found mercury in nearly one in three of the tested samples.

FDA's press officer, Michael Herndon, said his agency "takes mercury contamination very seriously" but doesn't believe the Environmental Health study provides "any specific information or sufficient analysis to reach the conclusion that there is any appreciable risk from this potential exposure from mercury."

Say what? Herndon wouldn't reveal the scientists who helped craft or approve FDA's statement. But make no mistake: Mercury is toxic in all forms. Physician David Wallinga, director of IATP's Food and Health Program, said, "The science increasingly suggests there may be no 'safe' level of exposure to mercury." Pregnant women and young children are especially vulnerable. When babies are exposed in the womb, brain development suffers.

Dufault goes one step further. She blames our "overall environmental mercury exposure through air, water and food ... for the genetic variation that has led to the increase in the number of cases of Autism Spectrum Disorder."

Dufault's insider's eyes see the "whole system" as "broken." "Biomedical researchers, and journal editors, rely on federal and corporate grant money these days to fund their research. ... Industry has a great deal of say over how the FDA operates. We need major reform at the FDA."

Whether we are talking about E. coli-contaminated spinach, salmonella-tainted peanut butter or mercury in HFCS, the problems we see today are the result of years of public underfunding of the very organizations designed to protect public health.

Here's what we can do:

Contact your representatives in Washington. Tell them you want to phase out mercury cell technology, ban mercury-grade ingredients for all food use and support the Missing Mercury in Manufacturing Monitoring and Mitigation Act. Sponsored in 2007 by then-Sen. Barack Obama, this legislation, if passed, would phase out the mercury cells in use in the United States by January 2012.

Read food labels. Avoid HFCS, and feed your children whole, unprocessed, environmentally friendly foods instead.

Read the reports and learn which brands contained mercury: iatp.org.

