Diet Soda Stays Sweet amid Scientific Debate

By LINDSEY JAHN, Associate Editor, *Food Manufacturing*

More and more research continues to show the detrimental effects of too much sugar in human diet. From being identified as a major culprit in diabetes and obesity [1] to being labeled as a dangerous toxin [2], sugar is garnering a bad reputation with some consumers.

Many consumers are now seeking easy ways to decrease their sugar intake, one of the simplest being switching from regular soda to diet. But this solution is more complex and confusing for consumers than it initially may seem.

Artificial sweeteners used in diet drinks, particularly aspartame, have been comprehensively studied for years to determine their safety. The FDA approved the use of aspartame in foods in 1981 after reviewing more than 100 studies. However, scientists and public health advocates continue to disagree on the safety of the substance.

The latest study [3] on aspartame to hit the news was set to be published this year by the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition.* The study claimed to have found a relationship between consuming diet soda containing the sweetener and an increased risk of certain cancers, including leukemia and Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH), which is affiliated with the study, promoted the research heavily with the media, and many major news outlets were set to cover the study's results.

The research drew the attention of the American Beverage Association [4] (ABA), who promptly dismissed the study as faulty science. "The authors said it best: their study has 'limited application' and their findings may be 'due entirely to chance.' We agree," the group said in a statement.

The ABA cited various studies conducted by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and other regulatory agencies as proof of aspartame's safety. The NCI study followed nearly 500,000 retirees and found no correlation between increased intake of aspartame-containing beverages and the development of cancer.

In a strange turn of events, BWH pulled back its support of the research just ahead of its publish date. The hospital's senior vice president of communications sent out an email to the media stating: "It has come to our attention that the scientific leaders at [BWH] did not have an opportunity, prior to today, to review the findings of the paper. Upon review of the findings, the consensus of our scientific leaders is that the data is weak, and that BWH Media Relations was premature in the promotion of this work. We apologize for the time you have invested in this story."

Ultimately, the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* chose to publish the study, despite much pushback from the scientists involved; however, the publication did make it clear that the study's results may be entirely due to chance, and that there may be no significant relationship between consuming diet drinks containing aspartame and a heightened cancer risk.

While faulty science was unveiled in this case, the fact that the study was published and discussed in the media only adds to the confusion that shoppers face when choosing which beverages to purchase. Should consumers select diet beverages shown to help manage a healthy weight, or are the chemically-derived sweeteners in these products too much of a risk?

Whether or not such a risk is real, it likely poses a "what if" scenario in consumers' minds that may result in enough uncertainty to cause shoppers to avoid sodas sweetened artificially, and that could be bad news for the industry if the right actions are not taken.

It is important for diet soda companies to be vigilant when it comes to such research, and to head off any concerns that consumers may have. Manufacturers should spend time communicating the many benefits of drinking diet soda, as well as addressing any studies involving their products or ingredients.

Taking a proactive approach could help stem any potential fears about the safety of diet soda — and help keep the industry sweet for years to come.

Does your company use any artificial sweeteners in its products? Have you heard any consumer feedback as a result of any of these studies? Let me know at lindsey.coblentz@advantagemedia.com *[5].*

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