FDA Examines Level of Arsenic in Apple Juice

MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Food and Drug Administration is considering tightening restrictions for the levels of arsenic allowed in apple juice after consumer groups pushed the agency to crack down on the contaminant.

Studies show that apple juice has generally low levels of arsenic, and the government says it is safe to drink. But consumer advocates say the FDA is allowing too much of the chemical — which is sometimes natural, sometimes man made — into apple juices favored by thirsty kids.

There is little consensus on whether these low levels could eventually be harmful, especially to children. Michael Taylor, FDA's deputy commissioner for foods, said Wednesday the agency has already stepped up testing and research on arsenic in apple and other juices and is seriously considering lowering the FDA's so-called "level of concern" for the contaminant.

"We continue to think that apple juice is generally safe based on the fact that the vast majority of samples are very low," Taylor said. "But we want to minimize these exposures as much as we possibly can."

Arsenic is naturally present in water, air, food and soil in the 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 pesticides — can be toxic and may pose a cancer risk if consumed at high levels or over a long period.

The FDA uses 23 parts per billion as a guide to judge whether apple juice is contaminated. The agency has the authority to seize apple juice that exceeds those levels, though it has never done so.

Consumer groups say the FDA's level is too high and isn't enforced with enough urgency. Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, released a study on Wednesday calling for the levels to be as low as 3 parts per billion. The Environmental Protection Agency has set levels for drinking water — it's consumed at much greater quantities than apple juice — at 10 parts per billion.

The Consumer Reports study showed that nine of 88 samples of apple juice taken from grocery stores had more arsenic than the EPA's standard for drinking water. But none of the samples exceeded the FDA's standards for inorganic, or man-made, arsenic.

Urvashi Rangan of the Consumers Union says the group has been in talks with the FDA on the issue and is encouraged by the discussion. Another advocacy group, Food and Water Watch, has lobbied the agency on the issue, and Dr. Mehmet Oz

has highlighted the issue on his nationally syndicated daytime show.

"We look at apple and grape juice as a poster child for arsenic in the food supply in general," Rangan said. "Chronic low-level exposure of carcinogen is something we should be concerned about."

Molly Kile, a professor at Oregon State University who has studied arsenic for a decade, says more research is needed to determine whether arsenic levels in juice are a problem.

"It is unclear at this point whether or not the arsenic found in apple juice is safe or unsafe," she said. "And really the question is what do these low levels exposure of arsenic mean in terms of health and children's health?"

So what is the parent of a juice-drinking toddler to do?

All of the experts — including the government and the consumer advocates — agree that drinking small amounts of apple juice isn't harmful. The concern is over the effects of drinking large amounts of juice over long periods of time. Parents with a real concern about arsenic should try to diversify the brands of juice they buy in case one brand tends to have more chemical exposure, Consumers Union says.

Another point of agreement is that children under 6 shouldn't be drinking much juice anyway because it's high in calories. Health experts say children under 6 shouldn't drink any more than 6 ounces of juice a day — about the size of a juice box. Infants under 6 months shouldn't drink any juice at all.

Gail Charnley of the Juice Products Association says the industry regularly tests arsenic levels and will follow the FDA's lead.

"Of course parents have concerns but they should know that the juice producers are committed to safety," she said. "Producers have children who drink juice too."

Oz has said he would still serve juice to his own children, though he strongly believes the government isn't doing enough.

"The absolute safest level for arsenic in your food is zero," he said Wednesday while acknowledging "that is impossible to achieve."

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