Professor prompts sweetener use cut

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desserts, and other foods under the trade name of NutraSweet, and is sold as a tabletop additive under the trade name of Equal. Wurtman originally testified at FDA hearings in favor of aspartame, successfully discarding Washington University of St. Louis Professor John Olney's assertion that aspartame was similar to monosodium glutamate (MSG) and that both could damage the human brain. "I think neither has any significant harmful effect on the brain," Wurtman said, "and neither does aspartame at moderate levels—such as those in foods."

Because the FDA has no lab of its own, it relies on manufacturers' tests and the findings of independent researchers like Wurtman and Olney. While it requires of the manufacturer standard tests for toxicity and carcinogenicity, it does not require testing for effects on the brain. Wurtman stressed that "the field of nutrition and the brain is a very new one."

Aspartame has been used in soft drinks in Canada, where saccharin is banned, for almost two years, "with no ill effects," according to the FDA. Wurtman said that he did not expect aspartame to affect health or behavior if taken in soft drinks at one-fourth to one-fifth the level used in Canada.

"Nevertheless, I believe that it remains of utmost importance that laboratory and clinical studies continued to determine the levels of dietary aspartame—taken alone or with a carbohydrate—that are absolutely safe," said Wurtman in his most recent letter to the FDA.

"Obviously, with FDA approval, we're satisfied with the safety of aspartame," said Tony Torsor, president of Coca-Cola's consumer division. He called the schedule for the introduction of aspartame into Diet Coke "privileged information" and discounted a rumor that Coca-Cola had introduced Diet Coke expressly as a vehicle for aspartame. The diet soft-drink market is worth an estimated $5 billion annually, and sales of aspartame are expected to net Searle hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Aspartame is made up of two amino acids, one of which, phenylalanine, is toxic to the brain at very high levels. "One important research question will be to determine the minimum level of toxicity exactly," said Wurtman. He added that the level of toxicity would be much lower for carriers of the gene for phenylketonuria, a disease whose victims are unable to metabolize phenylalanine. Aspartame elevates the level of some amino acids involved in making brain chemicals affecting the blood and heart. At the same time, it lowers the level of the amino acid precursors for serotonin, a neurotransmitter important in sleep, pain sensitivity, appetite control, and mood.

"We have shown chemical changes in human experimental subjects in aspartame studies that are very likely associated with behavioral and bodily changes," said Wurtman.

Lobby 7 was the site of a 12-hour dance marathon last Saturday sponsored by the Technology Community Association to benefit the American Cancer Society.

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