

Scientists say our food supply is safer than ever

ITHACA, NY. — America's food supply is safer now than ever before. So concluded a panel of scientists who participated in a recent Cornell University symposium on "The American Food Supply: Are We at Risk?"

There are exceptions, but these are not the risks the public worries about, the speakers said. Existing laws and regulations have dealt effectively with the problems of the past, and they continue to provide Americans with the most carefully regulated food supply in the world.

What worries the public? What are the real risks? How are risks assessed and managed?

Symposium speakers addressed these questions and related issues during the two-day conference, co-sponsored by the Institute for Comparative and Environmental Toxicology, the Institute of Food Science, and the Division of Nutritional Sciences, all at Cornell.

"Americans are concerned about the safety of the foods they eat," said Isabel Wolf, a consumer nutrition consultant.

Although the cholesterol, sugar, and sodium content of foods and the relationship between diet and health worry Americans, she said, the leading consumer concern is the presence of chemical residues in food.

The real risks from the food supply, however, are not those perceived by the public, said Virgil Wodicka, a food technology consultant who was formerly director of the Bureau of Foods in the Food and Drug Administration.

Citing the major hazards, he said that disease-causing microorganisms in food are the most important risk, and that malnutrition is another important hazard.

Pesticides and food additives were last on his list because the incidence of adverse health effects from these substances is low and because the problems they present are under control through effective regulatory measures, Wodicka said.

Many natural chemicals present in foods may be more hazardous than synthetic chemical residues, according to William Havender, a California-based consultant on environmental carcinogens. Evaluation of naturally occurring food chemicals with the same criteria used to assess the carcinogenicity of synthetic chemicals, he said, showed that many kinds of natural substances may be involved in causing cancer.

The potential cancer hazards posed by natural chemicals in bacon, mustard, mushrooms, and shrimp, for example, far exceed hazards posed by the daily dietary intake of DDT, PCB, or EDB, he claimed.

"Food additives and chemical contaminants individually are most likely to play only a minor role in cancer risk in the United States," said Sushma Palmer, executive director of the Food and Nutrition Board of the Commission of Life Sciences in the National Academy of Sciences.

Discussing the association between diet and cancer, Palmer said that certain dietary components such as fat and large quantities of cured, pickled, or smoked foods appear to be linked to increased cancer risk, yet the reasons for these effects are poorly understood.

Eating unwisely may be the most serious health risk, according to Victor Herbert, chief of the Hematology and Nutrition Laboratory at the Veterans Administration Medical Center, Bronx, NY.

Disease, nerve damage, birth defects, and even death result from fat diets which are immoderately high or low in one or

more of the four basic food groups. Some people try to get their nutrition from "pills, powders, potions, poultices, and perfusions," Herbert said.

"The important lesson is that less is better, and we should do whatever we can to reduce our exposure to unnecessary chemicals," said Sidney Wolfe, the founder and director of the Health Research Group in Washington, DC.

Chemicals that occur unnecessarily in the food supply are food dyes, which have no therapeutic or preservative benefit, he pointed out.

Regulatory agencies that monitor the safety of the American food supply face many dilemmas, said Christine Chaisson, director of Technical Assessment Systems Inc., Washington, DC.

Only recently has the government begun to consider the effects of food processing on the nature

and amounts of chemical residues in food, she said.

"The laws regulate at the farm gate. Unfortunately, you don't eat at the farm gate," Chaisson said. "You eat at home after your food has been washed, bleached, concentrated, heated, frozen, or mixed; this can change the content and the nature of the chemical to which your risk was calculated," Chaisson said.

Because there will always be risks in the food supply, how much risk is acceptable becomes the cornerstone of regulatory policy toward food contaminants, said Paul Hopper, corporate director for scientific affairs, General Foods Corp.

Hopper stressed that Americans must be educated to distinguish the real risks from the specter of risk often raised in the news media.

By following the USDA's "Dietary Guidelines for

Americans" with moderation, balance, and variety, Americans can enjoy the healthiest and safest food supply available, he said.

Other speakers and their presentations were Stephen Taylor, an associate professor in the Food Research Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, on food-related allergies; Alan Rulis, assistant to the director, Division of Food and Color Ad-

ditives at the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, on the FDA's priority-based assessment of food additives project; Mark Hegsted, professor emeritus of nutrition at Harvard Medical School, on the role of diet in disease; and Sidney Green, associate director of Laboratory Investigation, FDA's Division of Toxicology, on future research needs.



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