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Potential Cancer Link to Aspartame Revealed in New International Study

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Diet Coke is one of many products that contain the non-sugar sweetener aspartame. By. GETTY IMAGES

The non-sugar sweetener aspartame, common in many household food and drink products, has been classified as "possibly carcinogenic to humans" by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), according to an assessment released Thursday. This assessment was part of a joint effort also involving the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA).

Aspartame, introduced in the 1980s, is found in a myriad of products including diet drinks, chewing gum, gelatin, ice cream, yogurt, breakfast cereal, toothpaste, and over-the-counter

medications like cough drops and chewable vitamins. These findings cast a new light on the potential health impacts of this widely used artificial sweetener.

However, Dr. Francesco Branca, director of the Department of Nutrition and Food Safety at WHO, emphasized that while the assessments indicate potential risks, "safety is not a major concern at the doses which are commonly used." He adds, "Every year, 1 in 6 people die from cancer. Science is continuously expanding to assess the possible initiating or facilitating factors of cancer, in the hope of reducing these numbers and the human toll."

In a joint effort, IARC and JECFA conducted comprehensive reviews of aspartame's potential carcinogenic hazard and other health risks. The classification by IARC as "possibly carcinogenic" was made on the basis of limited evidence of cancer in humans, specifically hepatocellular carcinoma, a type of liver cancer. The group also cited limited evidence of cancer in experimental animals.

Concurrently, JECFA concluded that there was no compelling reason to alter the previously established acceptable daily intake (ADI) of 0–40 mg/kg body weight for aspartame. This means that normal consumption of aspartame, within the set limit, is considered safe.

“The findings of limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans and animals, and of limited mechanistic evidence on how carcinogenicity may occur, underscore the need for more research to refine our understanding of whether consumption of aspartame poses a carcinogenic hazard,” said Dr. Mary Schubauer-Berigan of the IARC Monographs programme.

Dr. Moez Sanaa, WHO’s Head of the Standards and Scientific Advice on Food and Nutrition Unit, echoed these sentiments, stating, “We need better studies with longer follow-up and repeated dietary questionnaires in existing cohorts. We need randomized controlled trials, including studies of mechanistic pathways relevant to insulin regulation, metabolic syndrome and diabetes, particularly as related to carcinogenicity.”

IARC and WHO have announced they will continue to monitor new evidence and encourage independent research groups to develop further studies on the potential association between aspartame exposure and consumer health effects.