

Studies reveal more dangers of high fructose corn syrup

Here's a story that hasn't been getting nearly enough play in the media: mercury levels in High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) are sky high.

This mercury link was unveiled by two recently released studies. One study published in Environmental Health tested 20 samples of commercial HFCS and found detectable mercury levels in nine of those samples. The other study by the watch-dog group the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) discovered mercury in almost a third of 55 popular food and drink brands that list HFCS as the top ingredient.

As you probably already know, HFCS has just about completely replaced sugar in our food – mostly because it's cheaper for manufacturers. The average American consumes approximately 12 teaspoons of HFCS every day. But American kids are eating and drinking 62 pounds of this sweetener every year. There's loads of HFCS in everything kids (and many adults) eat and drink -- soda, "fruit" drinks, cookies, gum, jelly, and baked goods. And that's only a partial list.

According to Dr. David Wallinga of the IATP, who actually co-authored both of these studies, "Given how much high-fructose corn syrup is consumed by children, it could be a significant additional source of mercury never before considered."

According to the IATP's report Not So Sweet: Mercury and High Fructose Corn Syrup, mercury-grade caustic soda is used to separate cornstarch from the corn kernel. This caustic soda can leave mercury behind in HFCS.

Just a quick reminder on the dangers of mercury: while it's a metal that occurs naturally, once it gets into your system it accumulates and does irreparable damage to your nervous system. This makes mercury especially dangerous to young children and fetuses whose central nervous system is still developing.

Any sane person would see that this is cause for concern. But unsurprisingly, the Corn Refiner's Association (CRA) thinks both of these studies are overblown and "based on outdated information of dubious significance." A CRA spokesperson says that the industry has been using mercury-free versions of caustic soda for years.

Excuse me if I'm disinclined to take the CRA at its word on this topic. After all, these are the same people who tried to convince the FDA to declare HFCS a "natural food" (a natural food made with mercury-grade caustic soda ... just like grandma used to make!). So they're not exactly the most straight-shooting organization, in my opinion.

"The bad news is that nobody knows whether or not their soda or snack food contains HFCS made from ingredients like caustic soda contaminated with mercury," Wallinga says. But he adds that mercury-free ingredients are out there and food manufacturers "just need a good push to only use those ingredients."

But remember: food manufacturers use HFCS as a money saving solution in the first place, so it's not like makers of HFCS are likely to make an expensive change to their processing systems. At the end of the day, profit will always trump safety.