WHO's Cancer Research Agency to Say Aspartame Sweetener a Possible Carcinogen

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On June 29, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the widely used artificial sweetener, aspartame, is set to be declared as “possibly carcinogenic to humans” by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). What does this mean? The IARC classifies substances in four categories: Carcinogenic to humans, probably carcinogenic to humans, possibly carcinogenic to humans and not classifiable. For example, cigarettes and alcohol are products that are classified as carcinogenic to humans. When a product is classified as “possibly carcinogenic to humans,” this means that there is limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans and less than sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity in experimental animals. Therefore, there are limited findings that links aspartame to causing cancer in humans.

The FDA deemed aspartame safe for consumption in 1981. Currently, aspartame can be found in a host of popular products, such as diet sodas, cereals, gum and toothpaste. The FDA has stated that it is under no obligation to change regulations pertaining to aspartame. Also, the FDA has provided its recommendation of the limited amount of aspartame that should be consumed. The FDA states that a 175-pound male should not consume more than 22 cans of diet soda or 116 cups of coffee with two sweetener packs per day. For additional context, another common circumstance of everyday life—electromagnetic fields from mobile phones—are also categorized by the WHO as possibly carcinogenic to humans.

What does all of this mean for manufacturers that use aspartame in their products? With the IARC set to list aspartame as possibly carcinogenic, more studies pertaining to effects of consuming aspartame will be conducted and the ongoing debate of whether aspartame has the potential to cause cancer in humans will continue. This puts companies on shaky ground because of the lack of clarity pertaining to aspartame. This was exhibited by PepsiCo's recent actions, as they removed aspartame from their sodas in 2015, brought it back a year later, only to remove it again in 2020. If aspartame were to be elevated to “probably carcinogenic to humans,” that could open the door for potential litigation initiated by consumers. Court verdicts have awarded damages to customers alleging that their medical condition was caused by a substance that the IARC rated as “probably carcinogenic to humans,” i.e., glyphosate-based weed killers. Therefore, the food and beverage industry has to be attentive to the ongoing scientific research regarding the consumption of aspartame.

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