

New Zealand Food Safety Authority is confident of aspartame safety

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Recent media reports may have raised unnecessary concerns for consumers about the safety of aspartame – used as a low energy sweetener in many common products – and need to be addressed, says the New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA).

“NZFSA has a role to provide accurate information on the safety of food sold in New Zealand, so people are able to make informed choices about what they eat. Misleading or unsubstantiated claims about a particular food can create fear and quite unnecessary concerns for consumers,” says Sandra Daly, NZFSA’s Deputy Chief Executive.

“Aspartame is probably one of the most studied products on sale today, and there is an extensive body of evidence that tells us it is a safe product that offers consumers a sweet low-calorie option in their diet.”

Recent media reports about possible reactions to large doses of aspartame from chewing gum, and reports of a study by the Italian Ramazzini Foundation which link aspartame with cancer, are not consistent with the findings of a large number of studies over many years which have been evaluated by leading food safety agencies around the world.

The United Kingdom Food Standards Agency, the US Food and Drug Administration and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) have all recently reconfirmed their confidence in the safety of aspartame.

“NZFSA continually assesses the weight of sound, scientific evidence that surrounds the use of all products, including aspartame. We can find no scientific basis for claims that the product is not safe to consume in sensible quantities.”

Aspartame is an intense sweetener – about 200 times sweeter than sugar – and has been used in soft drinks and other low-calorie or sugar-free foods around the world for the past 25 years.

Extensive studies have shown that, even if taken in high doses, the metabolites of this sweetener do not accumulate in toxic amounts. An adult would have to consume 14 cans of a sugar-free drink every day before reaching the acceptable daily intake (ADI) of aspartame. And they would need to do that every day of their lives before possibly showing any ill-effects.

“Eating too much of any one thing is not good for you – even those we consume every day, such as coffee, carrots and cake,” says Ms Daly.

“Anybody who wants to avoid foods containing aspartame can identify its presence from the label. Consumers can make informed choices because food manufacturers are required to list food additives and other ingredients, including sweeteners, on labels.”

Certain people with the genetic disease phenylketonuria (PKU), and pregnant women with high blood levels of phenylalanine have a problem with aspartame because they do not effectively metabolise the amino acid phenylalanine, one of aspartame's components. All New Zealand babies have a heel-prick test to identify this genetic disease and all products containing aspartame must include a warning for phenylketonurics that the sweetener contains phenylalanine.

For everybody else, aspartame provides a safe alternative to sugar.

