Sweetener Found To Promote Seizures In Predisposed Mice


Abstract (Summary)

Two Boston researchers reported at a scientific conference here that aspartame, the generic name for the artificial sweetener NutraSweet, promoted seizures in a study of mice predisposed to seizures. Richard Wurtman, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist, and Timothy Maher, a researcher at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, cautioned that the study doesn't necessarily apply to humans. Mr. Wurtman, a longtime questioner of aspartame's safety, currently is helping to conduct a study of the effects of aspartame on humans at risk for seizures.

NEW YORK -- Two Boston researchers reported at a scientific conference here that aspartame, the generic name for the artificial sweetener NutraSweet, promoted seizures in a study of mice predisposed to seizures. Richard Wurtman, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist, and Timothy Maher, a researcher at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, cautioned that the study doesn't necessarily apply to humans. Mr. Wurtman, a longtime questioner of aspartame's safety, currently is helping to conduct a study of the effects of aspartame on humans at risk for seizures. NutraSweet, made by NutraSweet Co., a Monsanto Co. unit, is used as a sweetener in diet soft drinks and many foods. The company said there's nothing novel to Mr. Wurtman's charges, which the Boston scientist has made in the past. NutraSweet said that before its product won Food and Drug Administration approval it gave normal mice ten times the aspartame dose Mr. Wurtman fed his mice, without any ill effects. Definitive answers still are needed on any effects aspartame may have on seizure-prone individuals. NutraSweet said it is awaiting results from clinical trials currently being conducted on humans. In the past, the Epilepsy Foundation has said it hasn't seen any correlation between aspartame and seizures in epileptics. In their experiments, the Boston researchers fed aspartame to mice that had been given drugs or other treatments to make them susceptible to epileptic-like seizures. They said 78% of the mice had seizures after an aspartame dose equivalent to that received by a human adult who drinks about 1.5 liters of aspartame sweetened diet soda. Only 50% of the mice not getting aspartame had seizures, they added. The researchers stressed that their study "does not indicate that aspartame itself causes seizures," but rather that it "promotes seizures in animals that are already at risk."