

Should Hot dogs carry a warning label?

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September, 2009

Recently, a lawsuit was filed by a group that promotes a meat-free diet, seeking to require cancer-risk labels on processed meats. The Cancer Project is a branch of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a group that lobbies against animal research and promotes the adoption of meat-free diets.

Americans paid **\$3.4 billion** for 730 million packages of hot dogs and sausages in supermarkets in 2008, according to the National Hot Dog & Sausage Council who obviously is against requiring cancer warning labels.

The label proposed by the vegan advocacy group reads, simply, "Warning: Consuming hot dogs and other processed meats increases the risk of cancer." They are asking a New Jersey court to order Oscar Mayer, Hebrew National and other food companies to slap this label on hot dog packages.

The nonprofit Cancer Project filed the lawsuit on July 22, 2009 on behalf of three New Jersey plaintiffs asking the Essex County Superior Court to compel the companies to place cancer-risk warning labels on hot dog packages sold in New Jersey.

"Just as tobacco causes lung cancer, processed meats are linked to colon cancer," said Neal Barnard, president of the Cancer Project and an adjunct professor at the George Washington University medical school in Washington, D.C. "Companies that sell hot dogs are well aware of the danger, and their customers deserve the same information."

The defendants in the lawsuit, which seeks class-action status, include Nathan's Famous Inc., Oscar Mayer owner Kraft Foods Inc., Sara Lee Corp., Marathon Enterprises Inc. and ConAgra Foods Inc., which owns Hebrew National.

Commenting on the lawsuit, Sydney Lindner, a Kraft spokeswoman, said, "These proposals are unfounded. Hot dogs have been enjoyed by consumers for more than 100 years." Of course, in all fairness, there has been a tremendous increase in stomach and colorectal cancer during that

same 100 year period.

In the lawsuit, the Cancer Project cites the role of nitrites, preservatives used in cured and processed meats such as hot dogs, in the development of cancer-forming agents. During digestion, nitrites break down into nitrosamines and other N-nitroso compounds that are considered carcinogens. Although some medical studies link red and processed meats to cancer risk, it's not clear whether it is because of the nitrites or other factors such as high fat content.

Said Keith-Thomas Ayoob, a nutritionist at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York: "There is speculation that nitrosamines can increase cancer risk when frequently consumed in large amounts. Occasional consumption should cause no worry. The stuff people typically have with a hot dog may be a more immediate concern: too many calories from all the fat-laden potato and macaroni salads, sugary drinks and sweet desserts."

An American Institute for Cancer Research report cited in the lawsuit notes that one 50-gram serving of processed meat -- about the amount in one hot dog -- consumed daily increases the risk of colorectal cancer 21% on average. Colorectal cancer kills about 50,000 Americans annually.

However, a 2004 analysis by Harvard University researchers of pooled data from 14 studies in North America and Europe did not find a similar link between various red and processed meats and cancer. But they did find that higher consumption of poultry and fish may be associated with a lower risk of colorectal cancer.

So, while the full story is still unresolved, this situation could be described as similar to the link between the smoking of tobacco products and lung cancer in the 1980's: While all the molecular events linking the smoking of tobacco to the development of lung cancer were not known, the link could not be disputed.

When asked how the warning label would affect his consumption of hotdogs, an information technology consultant replied, "Efforts to put warning labels on hot dog packages are "crazy." "It wouldn't change how many hot dogs I eat. Not at all!"

Another common reaction to the lawsuit involved "overpolicing," and questions like, "unless we're going to put a warning label on every single food and say what's bad in it, where's the fairness?"

Roger Clemens, a nutrition expert at USC's pharmacy school asked, "If one were to call for a 'black label' on frankfurters, where should the warning label end? If we were to evaluate each food for its naturally occurring toxins and eliminate that food, then our food plate would be empty."

Other consumers were simply skeptical of the Cancer Project's agenda. One humorous comment was, "Vegans complaining about hot dogs is like the Amish complaining about gasoline prices."

Many nutrition experts say that slapping warning labels on the staple of baseball games and picnics really wouldn't have much effect on public health, anyway.

"There may be arguments for broader health warnings about red meat consumption, but the bigger risk is of heart disease rather than cancer," said Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "Though I favor warning notices in certain circumstances, the overuse of warnings can lead to 'warning fatigue,' " Jacobson said. "Eating hot dogs occasionally is not by itself worrisome."

Conclusion: Personally, my one "fast-food" vice is a foot-long coney dog with lots of onions (great source of vitamin C). It's hard to find a really good coney sauce, so I don't eat many coneys over the year, and when I do, I usually stop with one, and seldom if ever eat french fries or drink soft drinks, along with the coney. So, when I can find a really good combination, I'll continue to imbibe. In the meantime, I'll continue to eat lots of fresh fruit, vegetables and salads, take the finest nutritional supplements available, drink lots of purified water, get a good nights rest, and trust the good Lord to continue to care for me, as He has for my first seventy-five years on this earth. That's as close to abstinence as I will ever get, probably. *Lyle*