Artificial Sweeteners Linked to Increased Cancer Risk

These sugar substitutes were linked to higher risk for overall cancer, particularly breast cancer and obesity-related cancers.

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The use of artificial sweeteners has long been debated among consumers and health care professionals.

Now, a new observational study by researchers Charlotte Debras and Mathilde Touvier at the French National Institute for Health and Medical Research (Inserm) and Sorbonne Paris Nord University, and colleagues, provides evidence that consumption of common artificial sweeteners was statistically linked to increased cancer risk. The study, however, does not prove causation. Results were published in PLOS Medicine.

Spanning 2009 to 2021, the NutriNet-Santé study evaluated 102,865 French adults. Participants self-reported diet, lifestyle, health data, medical history and sociodemographic information. Data about artificial sweetener intake was collected from 24-hour dietary records. Researchers then conducted statistical analyses to review the associations between the consumption of artificial sweeteners and cancer risk. The data were adjusted for several variables, including family history of cancer, body mass index, sex, physical activity, smoking and diabetes as well as participants' baseline intake of saturated fatty acids, sugar, sodium, whole-grain foods, dairy products and alcohol.

Results showed that people who consumed higher amounts of artificial sweeteners, particularly aspartame and acesulfame-K, were at an overall higher risk for cancer compared with those who consumed none, according to a press release. Those who consumed the most artificial sweeteners were approximately 13% more likely to develop cancer. There were particularly high risks for breast cancer and obesity-related cancers.

The authors believe that the results are robust enough to suggest that consumers may want to minimize their use of these sugar substitutes. "Our findings do not support the use of artificial sweeteners as safe alternatives for sugar in foods or beverages and provide important and novel information to address the controversies about their potential adverse health effects," they concluded.

Most products advertised as being sugar-free contain aspartame or acesulfame-K. These include diet sodas, yogurt, dairy products, breakfast cereals, jam and baked goods.

Although aspartame and acesulfame-K are approved by the Food and Drug Administration and other global health agencies, studies such as this may lead to a reevaluation of their safety.

To learn more, read "Diet Affects Cancer Growth and Treatment" and "Investigating the Impact of Diet on Tumor Growth."

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