

Irradiating Lettuce Will Save Kids' Lives

by Dennis T. Avery

For years, our Center has been demanding irradiation for spinach, lettuce, and other high-risk produce—to kill the food-borne bacteria that present a last big preventable risk in our food supply. On August 22, the Food and Drug Administration granted our plea.

FDA permission to irradiate produce is the biggest step forward in U.S. food safety since irradiation was approved for meat (read hamburger) in 1990. That followed dozens of needless “burger deaths” due to the rare-but-vicious E. coli O157 bacteria.

There's a problem, however: scare-mongers have warned the public that irradiation itself is not safe. We're not even irradiating much of our hamburger, even as recalls continue to warn us of the danger.

One scare-monger—a former professor of environmental medicine—said, “Every man, woman and child who takes a bite of irradiated food increases their chance of getting cancer.” Could he say that publicly without evidence? He could, and the papers quoted him. The truth, based on thousands of studies: Irradiation does not create dangerous cancer-causing organisms, nor does it make the food radioactive.

“In 2006, there were an estimated 50 billion servings of green, leafy salads served in this country, and there were approximately 1,200 people made ill,” says Sam Beattie of Iowa State. Our bacterial risks for fortunately low—but they are not zero. Irradiation can make them nearly zero.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that irradiation of high risk foods--certainly including hamburger, poultry, spinach and lettuce--could prevent up to a million cases of food poisoning per year, more than 6,000 catastrophic illnesses, and hundreds of American deaths—mostly children.

Remember the people who died from eating spinach contaminated with E. coli O157 a couple of years ago? It was organically-grown spinach, carefully washed and packed in a state-approved processing facility. But organic systems and washing don't eliminate the bacteria! Authorities, after the fact, found cattle in the region, a potential source of O157—and evidence that wild pigs could have carried the bacteria through the fence, where they snacked on the spinach. But dangerous bacteria always surround us—in the soil beneath our feet, and in the air we breathe. Organic farmers brag about using manure, which after all spreads dangerous bacteria. Fresh produce is not cooked, as meats are, so there's no “kill step.”

Can food processors use irradiation to pass along bad food? No. Irradiation kills only rapidly growing cells—those of insects and bacteria. As a bonus, the spoilage bacteria are killed too, so

produce can be left to ripen longer. It's not that irradiation makes the food taste better, but it gives farmers the chance to successfully market better-tasting produce. Repeated studies have confirmed that irradiation cannot mask off-flavors or the smell of spoiled foods.

What about irradiation destroying food value? Irradiation has less impact on nutritive factors than canning or cooking because it produces virtually no heat.

If you're uncomfortable with cobalt-60 irradiation, the industry also offers "electronic pasteurization." That's like putting your food through a low-power microwave, but it also kills any insects or bacteria.

By rights, the food industry should charge a premium for irradiated food. Its safety and peak flavors are benefits we can rely on and even taste. Meanwhile, we keep spending big money to "buy organic" as still another study—this one from the University of Copenhagen—found no demonstrable benefit from organic foods.

It took us a while to get used to seat belts and pasteurized milk, too, but it's time to start relying on the science-based safety of irradiation.

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