

Soy and Sanitation: Poor Reason to Go Vegan

by Dr. Kaayla Daniel, Ph.D., CCN – July 8, 2010

Fears about salmonella poisoning, listeria, swine and avian flus from animal foods are boosting the market for soy and other vegan foodstuffs and supplements. The demand is being fed by vegans, of course, but also from increasing numbers of omnivores who've been convinced that plant foods are the best way to avoid food poisoning. The safest and most sanitary foods of all, according to this line of thinking, is processed and packaged goods.

Market analyst Kathie Brownlie reveals in the online newsletter *NutraIngredients* that "the market is driven by crises - and it did not exist a decade ago." Another factor in this new and booming market is the widely perceived "healthy" image of vegan ingredients. According to Chris Olivant of the UK's Vegetarian Society, the numbers of vegetarians have steadily increased over the past decade, but "tend to peak in the immediate aftermath of a animal health scare, then drop back down to prior levels afterwards."

"If you have a complete portfolio of vegetarian ingredients, you will be prepared for any animal health-scare that breaks," says Lukas Christian, global product manager for beta-carotene at DSM Nutritional Products. *NutraIngredients* reports that DSM is launching a new synthetic beta carotene to compete against animal-derived beta carotenes. Other companies too, including BASF and Biodar have come out with vegetarian beta-carotenes. If you naively thought beta carotene supplements would come from carrots and other vegetables, welcome to the brave new world of supplements. Why grow carrots, after all, when you can produce beta carotene with microorganisms? And why bother with the care and feeding of wee beasties when you can manufacture a synthetic beta carotene that can be billed as vegetarian?

Given all the vegan scare stories and the filthy reality of factory-farming operations, it's hardly news that people in record numbers are avoiding meat, milk and eggs; but is it wise to go vegan for safety reasons? Not if we patronize local farmers who raise healthy, happy, free-range and pastured animals and make it a priority to run clean operations. And also not if it's diseases from listeria, e coli and salmonella that we are trying to avoid. Most cases come from contaminated commercial vegetables, strawberries, spinach, alfalfa sprouts, peppers etc, and not animal foods at all. As for soy, there are surprising risks of contamination. Packaged soy products seem aseptic, safe and sanitary, but recalls have been legion over the years, suggesting that the squeaky clean packaging might only seal in the disease.

LARGEST RECALL IN FDA HISTORY

Consider what may prove to be the largest recall in FDA history. It occurred in March 2010 and involved salmonella-contaminated hydrolyzed vegetable protein (HVP) produced by Basic Food Flavors Inc of Las Vegas, Nevada. Salmonella was found on the company's processing equipment.

HVP is used to enhance flavors of thousands of food products, extend shelf life, and otherwise increase the food industry's bottom line. HVP is an ingredient in just about every processed food available in stores. As a paste or powder, it is added to soups, sauces, chilis, stews, hot dogs, gravies, snack foods, dips and dressings. The name hydrolyzed vegetable protein most often refers to "hydrolyzed corn protein" or "hydrolyzed soy protein" and may sometimes be labeled as such. If mixed with spices, it is routinely identified only as "natural smoke flavor" or "natural flavors." This labeling practice protects proprietary recipes of manufacturers, but has long been a nightmare for people who are allergic to soy or corn, or who react to MSG, which is an inevitable and unavoidable

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byproduct of the hydrolyzing process. Products containing this additive may even state “No MSG” on the label, though this is clearly an untruth.

This particular recall has proved embarrassing to the FDA. Congressional investigators chided the agency for failing to oversee the production of HVP and other additives and food ingredients that are widely perceived as safe. In addition to HVP, these include partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, salt, spices, artificial flavors, emulsifiers, binders, vitamins, minerals, preservatives and other ingredients, most of which are intended to enhance taste, texture, nutritional content or shelf life. In a prepared statement, FDA spokeswoman Rita Chappelle conceded that the FDA “agrees broadly” that its oversight of such ingredients “could be strengthened.” Given the misplaced time and effort FDA has put into harassing small farmers, it’s not surprising that it has been asleep on its real job.

Health-conscious consumers might think that this is not their issue because the companies in the news are the big names like McCormick, Pringles, National Pretzel, Herbox (boullion), Quaker, Safeway and CVS snack products. Best Food Flavors alone has recalled nearly 800 products. This would suggest the problem lies with the processed, packaged, fast and junk foods on the Standard American Diet (SAD). Sadly, the truth is that many of the brands billed as “healthy” and sold in health food stores and upscale markets use the very same additives. Follow Your Heart brand vegetarian products, for example, recalled its barbecue, kung pao, savory, peanut and curry-flavored tofus as well as its “heart smart” veggie burgers, burritos and “chicken” pasta because of possible salmonella contamination “from one of our suppliers.”

The possibility of salmonella poisoning also drove recalls of those old hippie staples soy grits and flour. The recalled items came from Thumb Oilseed Producers’ Cooperative of Ubly, Michigan, sold under the brand names Soy Beginnings and Nexsoy.

NOT HVP ALONE

Other contamination problems have also beset soy-food manufacturers. Lifesoy Inc., a San Diego-based manufacturer of ready-to-eat soy products, was forced to stop manufacturing and distributing its sweetened and unsweetened soy milk, fried tofu, fresh tofu, soybean pudding, and other products because it did not hold and store foods under refrigerated conditions cold enough to prevent the growth of microorganisms. Interesting enough when the FDA first discovered Lifesoy’s unsanitary practices in 2007, it did not harass the company (as it does small farmers and cottage industries) but actively tried to help it comply with Good Manufacturing Practices and stay in business. The company’s failure to do so led to its shutdown.

The LifeSoy case indicates why most tofu products coming out of large manufacturing facilities are pasteurized today. In the good old days, there were also cases of contamination, of course, with most occurring at Asian groceries or old-fashioned small health food stores where fresh blocks of tofu were displayed in water in produce sections. The tofu was not refrigerated and open to airborne contamination as well as bugs from customers reaching into the water with tongs.

Think soy milk is safe? Bonsoy soy drink was whisked out of markets in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Ireland, Singapore and Hong Kong this last spring because of dangerously high iodine levels derived from kombu, a seaweed ingredient. That manufacturing error sank at least 38 people’s



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thyroids. Ironically, the kombu was put in there to begin with because of soy's adverse effects on the thyroid, a risk highest among consumers who are iodine deficient. Recently a reformulated version was approved for sale by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). Meanwhile other products containing seaweed are being investigated.

FORMULA FOR DISASTER

One of the most frequently recalled products is infant formula. Between 1982 and 1994 there were 22 significant recalls of infant formula in the United States due to health and safety problems. Seven of these recalls were classified by the FDA as "Class I" or potentially life threatening. And things haven't improved much since then. Recent recalls were made by Nestle (Carnation), Abbott, Mead Johnson, Wyeth, and Nutricia, among other companies, and for widely sold products under the brand names of Alsoy, GoodStart, Isomil, Nutramigen, Nursoy, and Soylac. Both dairy and soy formulas have been recalled for everything from contamination by Salmonella or Klebsiella Pneumoniae to bits of glass. Yes, glass, as in the shards found in more than 102,000 Mead-Johnson jars.

Manufacturing errors are an especially big problem with soy formula. Failure to add supplemental B1, B12, Vitamin K, chloride and other needed supplements has led to deaths and hospitalizations of babies. When such omissions happen with dairy formula, the deficiency is less likely to be a life-threatening matter. Cow's milk, after all, contains what a mammal needs to grow. Although obviously not at the ideal levels for a human baby as opposed to a calf, vital components don't go missing. In 2003, three babies in Israel on soy formula died from an extreme deficiency of vitamin B1, and another eight babies were hospitalized, of which four suffered permanent brain damage. The formula manufacturers had left out B1 on the false assumption that soybeans contain plenty of B1.

Hard to believe? Want to check out future recalls? Get industry news from a free online subscription to *NutraIngredients* and by visiting the FDA's own website (www.fda.gov). Then put your energy into buying both animal and plant foods directly from small, local farmers you know, visit and trust.

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HYPERLINKS for PDF version:

NutraIngredients – Article by Jess Halliday 13 January 2006, "Animal scares create demand for vegetarian ingredients" = <http://www.nutraingredients.com/Industry/Animal-scares-create-demand-for-vegetarian-ingredients>

March 2010 – FDA News Release 4 March 2010, "Salmonella Tennessee Identified in a Processed Food Ingredient" = <http://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm203067.htm>

chided – MSNBC post 5 March 2010 by Associated Press, "GAO calls for tighter FDA ingredient oversight" = http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35733193/ns/health-food_safety/

www.fda.gov – website for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)