

A holiday reminder: Don't fear aspartame

Summer news about cancer risk shouldn't be what deters you from diet soda

As Christmas and all those sugary foods approach, your mind may wander back to conflicting summer news about aspartame, an artificial sweetener found in things like diet soda, gum, ice cream, yogurt and other sugar-free foods. The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) cited "limited evidence" of aspartame being "possibly carcinogenic to humans."

Not so fast, responded the [United States Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#).

"Aspartame is one of the most studied food additives in the human food supply," the agency said. "FDA scientists do not have safety concerns when aspartame is used under the approved conditions."

Carly Zimmer, a registered dietitian-nutritionist at OSF HealthCare, explains how we got here.

Zimmer says the agency within WHO that researches cancer has [four levels](#) of certainty that a substance can cause the disease. Group one is labeled "carcinogenic to humans." Things like tobacco, alcohol and solar radiation are here. Group 2A is "probably carcinogenic to humans." Group 2B is "possibly carcinogenic to humans." And group three is "not classifiable as to its carcinogenicity to humans." Coffee and mercury are in this group.

WHO put aspartame in group 2B along with aloe vera plant extract and traditional Asian pickled vegetables.

"That group B classification means there is a possible risk for that substance to cause cancer, not that it's necessarily linked to cancer," Zimmer says.

The other thing to consider: Zimmer says the FDA sets an acceptable daily intake for the six sweeteners it has approved. For aspartame, the limit is 50 milligrams per kilogram of body weight. For example, someone who is 60 kilograms ([or 132 pounds](#)) would have to consume 75 packets of aspartame (think of brand names like Equal, NutraSweet and Sugar Twin) in a day to reach the limit.

"It would be pretty hard to reach those numbers," Zimmer says.

That's not a license to add a lot of sweeteners to your drinks or drink soda with every meal. Sugary foods are bad for your heart, among other things, and should be consumed in moderation. But cancer risk from diet soda? It's not something to lose sleep over.

"Artificial sweeteners definitely have a place [in diets], but we don't want to consume them in excess," Zimmer says. For example, sweeteners can add sweetness to foods without raising blood sugar. That's helpful for people with diabetes or heart disease.

Want to cut aspartame out greatly or all together? Try fruit-infused water, which you can make at home or get at the store. But check the label. Zimmer says drink mixes like Crystal Light often have aspartame. Hint Water is a better choice, she says. Also, look for high levels of added sugar on the food label.

And in general, talk to your health care provider or a dietitian if you have questions about what you should eat and drink.