

Can Diet Coke KILL You?

Are you still drinking Diet Coke? Or have you taken the Pepsi Challenge, and now feel you are addicted to your diet drinks? You might be.

Although the scientific data is sparse, there are a growing number of consumers who feel that NutraSweet is pure poison. They tell stories of mysterious medical problems, from dizziness and seizures, which they attribute to ingesting moderate amounts of foods containing the substance, which goes by the trade name of aspartame. These symptoms almost always go away when the person stops consuming the artificial sweetener.

Leading the charge against Nutrasweet is Barbara AlexanderMullarkey, a journalist in Oak Park, Illinois who writes an ecology/nutrition column for *Wednesday Journal*. Over the past decade, Mullarkey has published dozens of articles questioning the safety of aspartame. Mullarkey charges that the FDA's initial investigation of aspartame was flawed; that the G.D. Searle Company, in charge of testing the sweetener, withheld information from the FDA regarding negative side-effects suffered by laboratory animals; and that U.S. Attorney Sam Skinner, who was investigating Searle, was offered and accepted a job with Searle's law firm, and then canceled his investigation citing a possible conflict of interest.

Then there is Mary Stoddard, who runs the Aspartame Consumer Safety Network in Dallas, Texas. Stoddard used to write ads for Diet Dr. Pepper. She also used to drink it - about a can every day. Then one day, Diet Dr. Pepper changed its artificial sweetener from saccharine to aspartame. "I started drinking it, and I started getting sick," she says. Her daughter, who was drinking Diet Crystal Light, developed migraines and tachycardia. Eventually, Stoddard contends, her daughter had a grand mal seizure before her whole class. Both mother and daughter's symptoms began to clear up when they removed aspartame from their diets.

Of course, removing the substance from ones diet becomes increasingly difficult as aspartame finds its way into more and more foods every year. And, though you may have seen the ubiquitous NutraSweet logo on diet drinks and low-fat yogurt, you may not know that aspartame is now approved for use by restaurants, and is routinely added to children's medicines. All in all, Stoddard says that more than 6,000 people have contacted her reporting problems with aspartame. She tells them all the same thing: "I tell people that if they are having a problem, to get off the product." *Wednesday's Journal* has also published numerous letters in which parents say that their children's behavioral problems mysteriously disappear when they stop drinking diet soft drinks.

by Simson L. Garfinkel



Call up the NutraSweet Company, now an independent entity, and they'll tell you that Mullarkey and Stoddard are on an irrational witchhunt against a safe and effective artificial sweetener. NutraSweet says that these two women are trying to stir up public hysteria using non-scientific surveys and anecdotal reports. "The official company position is that aspartame is safe. It is the most tested food ingredient in history," says Richard Nelson, NutraSweet's Vice President of integrated marketing communications. The FDA backs up NutraSweet, using data provided by the company as well as the information obtained by the Centers for Disease Control's "passive monitoring" effort, a system which has been in effect since aspartame's approval.

The facts, undisputed by either side in the debate are that NutraSweet, a.k.a. aspartame, is a small molecule made from two amino acids, aspartic acid and phenylalanine. Amino acids are the basic building-blocks of proteins. In fact, NutraSweet would chemically be considered a protein if 22 amino acids were present in its structure. However, since it has only two amino acids, it is considered a dipeptide. Literature provided by the FDA states that "aspartame is made up of the same ingredients as proteins." Unfortunately, that's a misleading statement to make. Snake venom is also made up from amino acids, and it is deadly.

When aspartame is heated, it breaks down into a variety of chemicals, including methanol and diketopiperazine (DKP). Methanol is a deadly alcohol that people sometimes accidentally get when making moonshine; it causes blindness, brain damage, and ultimately death. Not much is known

Danforth's or any of his colleagues' circles were aware of. Thomas (unlike Bill Clinton) had already admitted to the FBI that he had inhaled marijuana in his college days, but Hill claimed he had also been a purveyor of "blue" movies and was hiding even worse skullduggery. While no Mike Tyson, Thomas was blunt and vulgar and had tried to bully the women working under him into his bed, even firing one who refused. At Hill's revelations, all jaws dropped.

Danforth's account gives his first-hand view of these days. *Resurrection* reads something like a sermon by revivalist Jimmy Swaggart. Danforth, a sincere Southern Christian gentleman, could not believe his protégé was guilty of such shoddy carnality as telling his employees to either put out or get out or that he was a connoisseur of XXX movies like *The Adventures of Bad Mama Jama*.

In Danforth's opinion (buttressed by a quote from the Talmud), Thomas had in fact been murdered by way of his reputation being destroyed. God had apparently turned his back on his anointed one. To Danforth, Anita Hill was literally evil personified, and she had smitten the Lord's one and only hand-picked Supreme Court justice.

Thomas himself was crushed. He writhed on the floor. There was wailing and gnashing of teeth. There was weeping and hyperventilating. There was even vomiting. It appeared Satan had won the day. The Biblical story of Job was being retold.

In Danforth's account, there were numerous tools used to get Thomas through the valley of the shadow: prayer meetings (with hands held), the reading of psalms, "praise tapes," soul searchings, etc. — even the playing of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's emetic rendition of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

Thomas, says Danforth, was plagued not by Hill's accusations as such; rather, he felt it was some deep secret sin that had brought God's judgment down on him.

Luckily for Thomas, vengeance was not solely the prerogative of the Lord — He had his earthly army, too, equipped with cash and connections. An odd coalition of right-wingers, Washington insiders, fundamentalists, and PR men formed to destroy this female and keep their man from getting "Borked," as

Washington insiders had put it.

Hill, seen as the female Antichrist/Whore of Babylon/Jezebel, became the victim of an all-out sleaze crusade from the Army of Right. She was accused of lesbianism, hallucinations, radicalism, erotomania, of being a spurned woman, a perjurer, and a sprinkler of pubic hairs. Thomas (whose second wife is white) also did not hesitate to point out that he liked women with lighter skin than Hill's, and therefore there could have been no attraction between them.

Despite a vicious and dishonest counter-campaign being waged on his behalf against Hill, Thomas claimed he was able to take out some much-needed time for spiritual growth and was emerging from the crucible a true son of the faith.

Thomas said that "it was the first time... since the '60s that I have just opened up... and asked Him to take charge of my life, and also to connect myself to following His will... I became a better person... and became closer to what Jesus was." Danforth claimed no less than that Thomas had been reborn — presumably for the second time.

Contrary to rumor, Hill, a former teacher at Oral Roberts University Law School (named after the holy-rolling faith healer of that name), had no Democrat bigwig as her sponsor. She

had come to Washington out of a rather simple, naïve sense of duty more potentially destructive to her career than helpful.

The tide turned when at last Thomas made his "high-tech lynching" speech (rather in the same spirit as Richard Nixon's classic "Checkers" pitch). Thomas, claiming divine inspiration (reborn for probably a third time) and full of the Holy Spirit, went before the Judiciary Committee repeating over and over again, "In the name of Christ. In the name of Christ."

He turned the tables by accusing the committee itself. He said (and I agree) that the affair was "Kafkaesque." He told them they would not be allowed "to probe into my private life. This is not what America is all about."

He also said privately that they could "Take this job and shove it."

So Thomas, despite his shortcomings, was duly confirmed. The announcement came to him as he lay in a bathtub, reading to the sound of religious music. Appropriately, he merely shrugged at the news.

Apostate and libertine Massachusetts Sen. Ted Kennedy, the only liberal on the committee capable of interfering, was, at the time, suffering from a

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***The Tofu Tollbooth*, compiled by Dar Williams [\$8.95 softcover, Ardwork Press, PO Box 814, Northampton, MA 01061-0814, 1-800-TOFU-2-GO]**

This useful little book is a guide to finding vegetarian food when on the road in the U.S. (minus Alaska and Hawaii). Broken down into sections by state, *The Tofu Tollbooth* gives a city-by-city listing of grocery stores, food cooperatives, delis, cafés, and juice bars that cater to the needs of the meat-free eater.

Each entry gives detailed directions from major highways to the site, and lists clever little logos that tell the reader at a glance what services are offered — whether pets are allowed, whether beer and wine are available, and, most importantly... is there a bathroom?

Compiled by Northampton, Mass. musician Dar Williams (and a cast of thousands), the book has already received praise from such veggie luminaries as Jonathan Fishman of PHISH (one of America's strangest bands). Indeed, this book seems geared best for the new crop of far-traveling vegetarian musicians who may have toured through prairie outposts like Tulsa, Oklahoma, a hundred times without realizing that they could healthily stuff their faces at Tulsa's Akins Natural Foods. French fries and beer, 60 nights running, do not make for a healthy band.

The book's only weak point is that it gives virtually no description of each location except for the logos. A couple of sentences about each place would flesh out the book nicely, and make it even more valuable to America's tofu travelers. But, in general, this first edition of *The Tofu Tollbooth* is more than worth the cover price.

—review by Jason Pramas

about DKP, although Dr. Jacqueline Verrett, a former FDA toxicologist, testified before a U.S. Senate hearing in 1987 that DKP can cause uterine polyps and significant changes in blood cholesterol. Aspartame can also break down if it is exposed to moisture for an extended period of time.


If aspartame breaks down in water, then why is it in Diet Coke? Good question. When aspartame was first approved in July, 1981, the FDA only allowed it to be used in dry food products. A few months later, the FDA broadened that approval to cover tabletop sweeteners, tablets, cold breakfast cereals, chewing gum, dry based for beverages, instant coffee, and a few other dry products. Aspartame wasn't approved for soft drinks until July 8, 1983 — a week after the National Soft Drink Association urged the FDA to delay approval of aspartame for carbonated beverages pending further testing, according to an article by Mullarkey which appeared in the May/June issue of *Informed Consent* magazine.

And while the findings on aspartame seem speculative at best, there

are many who contend that aspartame also causes carbohydrate cravings, and worse, that it may be addictive. If so, then it would be a dieter's nightmare: a substance that leaves you wanting cake, and wanting more diet soda as well.

"There is no evidence that aspartame causes dizziness or other medical symptoms," contends NutraSweet's Nelson. "Aspartame has been demonstrated to be safe in a very rigorous testing program, and those results have been confirmed time and time again around the world."

Nevertheless, Nelson does hedge his words: "Our advice to people who believe that aspartame is not right for them is that they choose another sweetener."

What Nelson says is probably good advice—advice that I follow myself. Three years ago, a friend gave me a glass of strong lemonade. Within thirty minutes, I was dizzy and having visual problems. It took more than an hour for the whole experience to stop. When I came down from the drug-like experience, I learned that the lemonade had been sweetened with NutraSweet. 

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