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Study Finds High-Fructose Corn Syrup Contains Mercury

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MONDAY, Jan. 26 (HealthDay News) -- Almost half of tested samples of commercial high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) contained mercury, which was also found in nearly a third of 55 popular brand-name food and beverage products where HFCS is the first- or second-highest labeled ingredient, according to two new U.S. studies.

HFCS has replaced sugar as the sweetener in many beverages and foods such as breads, cereals, breakfast bars, lunch meats, yogurts, soups and condiments. On average, Americans consume about 12 teaspoons per day of HFCS, but teens and other high consumers can take in 80 percent more HFCS than average.

"Mercury is toxic in all its forms. Given how much high-fructose corn syrup is consumed by children, it could be a significant additional source of mercury never before considered. We are calling for immediate changes by industry and the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration] to help stop this avoidable mercury contamination of the food supply," the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy's Dr. David Wallinga, a co-author of both studies, said in a prepared statement.

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In the first study, published in current issue of Environmental Health, researchers found detectable levels of mercury in nine of 20 samples of commercial HFCS.

And in the second study, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), a non-profit watchdog group, found that nearly one in three of 55 brand-name foods contained mercury. The chemical was found most commonly in HFCS-containing dairy products, dressings and condiments.

But an organization representing the refiners is disputing the results published in Environmental Health.

"This study appears to be based on outdated information of dubious significance," said Audrae Erickson, president of the Corn Refiners Association, in a statement. "Our industry has used mercury-free versions of the two re-agents mentioned in the study, hydrochloric acid and caustic soda, for several years. These mercury-free re-agents perform important functions, including adjusting pH balances."

However, the IATP told the Minneapolis Star Tribune that four plants in Georgia, Tennessee, Ohio and West Virginia still use "mercury-cell" technology that can lead to contamination.

IATP's Ben Lilliston also told HealthDay that the Environmental Health findings were based on information gathered by the FDA in 2005.

And the group's own study, while not peer-reviewed, was based on products "bought off the shelf in the autumn of 2008," Lilliston added.

The use of mercury-contaminated caustic soda in the production of HFCS is common. The contamination occurs when mercury cells are used to produce caustic soda.

"The bad news is that nobody knows whether or not their soda or snack food contains HFCS made from ingredients like caustic soda contaminated with mercury. The good news is that mercury-free HFCS ingredients exist. Food companies just need a good push to only use those ingredients," Wallinga said in his prepared statement.

More information

The U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry has more about mercury and health.

SOURCE: Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, news release, Jan. 26, 2009