

2015 01.13 Health Matters Popcorn Update

This is Health Matters, reporting on the difference between real and fake popcorn. Popcorn's the best. It's quick. It's easy. Kids love it. It takes to movies like a duck to water. It's America's favorite snack food and a billion dollar a year industry, but there's real popcorn and then there's microwave popcorn.

Real popcorn is actually one of the most nutritious snack foods around. It provides 67 % as much protein and just as much calcium as an equal amount of beef, and it delivers 110% as much iron as well. An average serving of popcorn, estimated at 1 and 1/2 ounces, supplies the same amount of energy as two eggs. And, if you eat real popcorn without butter, a cup contains fewer calories than half a medium grapefruit.

So what do we mean by real popcorn? We mean the kind you pop yourself. The kind that is not packaged to pop in a microwave oven. Microwave popcorn is loaded with enough chemical contaminants to merit the label dangerous to human health, and we are not exaggerating. As explained in the 2013 Popcorn Agri-Chemical Handbook, industrially grown popcorn is treated, heavily, with insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, soil fumigants, growth regulators and nitrogen stabilizers, and that's just the cultivation side of what's lurking in microwave popcorn.

Another side of the story has to do with the processing and packaging of the final product. To start with the packaging, microwave popcorn bags are coated with chemicals that break down when heated. Two products of this breakdown are compounds that the Environmental Protection Agency, the EPA, has classified as likely carcinogens, and carcinogens are far from the only issue. A Colorado Court awarded \$7 million in a settlement regarding health impacts of microwave popcorn. The Denver resident who received the settlement had something called butter lung, which he contracted after eating two bags of popcorn a day for years. His lung damage came from artificial butter flavoring added to microwave popcorn, and from noxious fumes coming out of his microwave when he made popcorn.

Butter lung was first identified in microwave popcorn factory workers exposed to the chemicals several hours a day. The butter flavoring involved in this and other like cases has since been removed from microwave popcorn, but the industry is still adding toxic chemicals to packaging for microwave popcorn. Legal settlements involving the toxin in microwave popcorn bags total over \$100 million dollars so far.

The bag coating contains two chemicals that leach into the popcorn and contaminate blood. Chemicals that disrupt the endocrine system and cause developmental and reproductive risks. In rats, the chemicals have caused a dramatic rise in infertility. They have also caused liver, pancreas, testicular and mammary gland tumors in rats, as well as prostate cancer, and that's just the packaging problem.

Microwave popcorn is a highly processed product that contains several ingredients known for adverse health impacts. We're talking partially hydrogenated (high-DRAW-gen-ate-ted) soybean oil, modified cornstarch, maltodextrin, (malto-DEX-trin) monosodium glutamate (GLUTE-a-mate). artificial coloring, chemically processed salt, and a chemical added to preserve freshness. Partially hydrogenated soybean oil and modified cornstarch contain Roundup, an herbicide that suppresses thyroid and pancreas function. Roundup also contains an inhibitor which stops the digestion of protein and stunts growth. Maltodextrin is linked to allergic reactions, weight gain, bloating and flatulence.

The preservative added to microwave popcorn causes thyroid, brain, pancreatic and adrenal cancer in rats. It also leads to prostate inflammation in rats, so that's the chemical time bomb you're ingesting when you eat microwave popcorn. I can only imagine what this means for the development and long-term health of children who take in these chemicals with any frequency.

And yet, there's such a simple, healthy alternative; good old fashioned do-it-yourself popcorn. Made in a hot air popper, or on top of the stove. Some may say; yeah, sure, good old fattening popcorn, because for most of us there's no escaping the fact that it tastes great when served with melted butter. If weight gain is a big issue for you, real buttered popcorn may be something to avoid. There's no question it's high in calories, but it's also high in nutrition, and many people find popcorn made with olive oil almost as good.

Sources and Links

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