

## F.D.A. Defends Nutrasweet as Safe



By The Associated Press

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The Food and Drug Administration reaffirmed the safety of Nutrasweet in response to accusations today that the artificial sweetener might be linked to brain tumors.

A recent study at Washington University found that brain tumors increased by about 10 percent in the mid-1980's, shortly after Nutrasweet reached the market.

The study does not prove that Nutrasweet is a culprit. The author of the study, Dr. John Olney, did not examine whether tumor patients actually consumed Nutrasweet, and Government figures show the increase in brain tumors leveled off beginning in 1985, four years after Nutrasweet was first sold.

Dr. Olney acknowledged today that he lacked proof that Nutrasweet was dangerous, but he joined consumer advocates in demanding that the drug agency and Congress order new, large studies of Nutrasweet, which is also known as aspartame.

"It's possible aspartame could be a weak carcinogen," he said.

Sales of Nutrasweet have risen sharply in the last decade. Therefore, if it really caused brain tumors, the increase should have continued as people ate more Nutrasweet, said Dr. David A. Kessler, the Commissioner of Food and Drugs.

A link "just doesn't hold up," said Dr. Kessler, who previously ordered a review of Nutrasweet because of Dr. Olney's concerns. That review has been completed.

The Deputy Commissioner of Food and Drugs, Michael Friedman, a former National Cancer Institute oncologist who led that review, said, "This is a safe product for the American public to use."

The cancer institute says brain tumors rose from 5 per 100,000 Americans in 1973 to about 6.4 per 100,000 in 1985, with the sharpest jump from 1984 to 1985. Preliminary data show 6.2 tumors per 100,000 people in 1993.

Nutrasweet has long been controversial, and has been given the blame by some for reactions from vertigo to seizures.

Cancer fears emerged when a study in the 1970's found that rats fed aspartame had more brain tumors than rats without aspartame in their diets.

Other studies failed to find a link, but in 1980 outside scientific advisers to the Food and Drug Administration urged more rigorous research before Nutrasweet was sold.

In 1981, a Japanese rat study found no cancer link, and the Food and Drug Administration approved Nutrasweet.

But the Community Nutrition Institute, a consumer group, today called that research "shoddy," and Dr. Olney demanded a study of whether aspartame could interact with substances in the stomach to cause genetic mutations.

The Monsanto Company, the manufacturer, responded that Nutrasweet was the most studied food additive sold and accused critics of "causing unwarranted alarm."