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How much arsenic in our food is too much?

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A surprising fact emerged Friday as the federal government announced a proposal to restrict the level of arsenic in apple juice: The US Food and Drug Administration has never before set an enforceable limit for arsenic levels in food.

That may lead consumers to wonder: How much arsenic is in our food anyway? And how much of a risk does it pose to our health?

Inorganic arsenic, the type of arsenic to which the regulation would apply, has long been known to be a cancer-causing agent. It has also been associated with skin lesions, developmental effects, cardiovascular disease, neurotoxicity, and diabetes, according to the FDA.

However, the levels of arsenic typically found in apple juice and other foods would take years to have an effect on a person's health, said Patty Lovera, assistant director of Food & Water Watch, one of the groups that pushed for the FDA to impose the new limit.

"This isn't something that's going to make you sick tomorrow, it's long-term exposure," Lovera said in a phone interview Friday.

Apple juice in particular is a concern because it's a drink that parents commonly give to children, consumer advocates said. The issue received widespread attention in 2011, when "The Dr. Oz Show," raised alarm about the carcinogen in the popular children's beverage.

"Children, especially children, consume a great deal of juice," said Judy Braiman, president of the Empire State Consumer Project, via phone Friday. "I know I started all five of my children on apple juice."

Theresa Eisenman, a spokeswoman for the Food and Drug Administration, said the levels of arsenic found in apple juice are safe for consumption.

"Based on the FDA's testing and analysis of arsenic levels and apple juice consumption patterns, we are confident in the overall safety of apple juice for children and adults in this country," Eisenman said via email Friday. "We continue to evaluate all available data and make decisions based on sound science. In the next year, FDA will be sampling several types of foods, including those that usually test positive for arsenic."

A 2011 investigation by Consumer Reports found some juices had levels of arsenic above that allowed in drinking water. Of 88 samples of apple and grape juice purchased in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, 10 percent exceeded federal drinking water standards of 10 parts per billion and 25 percent had levels higher than the 5 parts per billion limit for bottled water set by the Food and Drug Administration.

In a statement Friday, the FDA said it has been monitoring the presence of arsenic in apple juice for the past 20 years and has "consistently found that samples contain levels of arsenic that are low, with few exceptions." The agency's proposal would limit the allowable amount of inorganic arsenic in apple juice to 10 parts per billion, the same level set by the US Environmental Protection Agency for arsenic in drinking water. Any amount above the "action level" could lead to enforcement by the agency, according to the administration.

"While the levels of arsenic in apple juice are very low, the FDA is proposing an action level to help prevent public exposure to the occasional lots of apple juice with arsenic levels above those permitted in drinking water," Michael R. Taylor, the FDA's deputy commissioner for foods and veterinary medicine said in a statement released by the FDA Friday.

Consumer advocates have lobbied the government to take action on arsenic in other foods, including rice and chicken. Until recently, the poultry industry commonly placed an additive containing arsenic in chicken feed. In 2011, Alpharma, the largest producer of the additive, voluntarily suspended sales of the drug. In its own testing, the Empire State Consumer Project has also found high levels of arsenic in wine, Braiman said.

"I don't think this should be the end of this, it's a start," Braiman said.

The FDA is in the process of sampling and analyzing rice and rice products for inorganic arsenic, following the same process the agency used while evaluating arsenic in apple juice, Theresa Eisenman, a spokeswoman for the agency, said in an email Friday. The results, together with "all other relevant information," will be taken into account as the regulatory agency determines whether to set arsenic limits for rice.

The FDA is also working with the Department of Agriculture and the food industry "to consider mitigation strategies to reduce levels of arsenic in these products," Eisenman said.

Among other sources, arsenic can be traced to pesticides that have long been banned in the United States but continue to linger in the soil.

Consumer groups also warn that particular attention should be paid to foods from China, where environmental regulations and enforcement is often lax. As much as 60 percent of the apple juice consumed in the United States comes from China, Lovera said.

"China in particular has had a pretty disturbing track record when it comes to food safety," Lovera said. "They're a big supplier so we think there should be increased scrutiny because of the proportion of the supply that's coming from there."

The FDA not seen different levels of arsenic in apple juice from China, Eisenman said, adding that US importers are responsible for ensuring that foods they import are safe for consumers and in compliance with US regulatory standards.