

Irradiated Food: Is a Mango Exposed to Gamma Rays Safe to Eat?

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Description

In 1986, food irradiation -- exposing fresh fruits and vegetables to gamma rays -- is hotly debated. Irradiation researchers insist the FDA-approved process is safe; some consumer groups say food safety tests are inconclusive.

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Irradiated Food, Irradiation, Radiation, Exposure, Gamma Ray, Food Processing, Fresh Fruit, Fresh Vegetables, Preservative, Shelf Life, Refrigeration, Insect, Insecticide, Nutrient, Loss, Vitamin C, Temple Orange, Mango, Texture, Consumer Group, Labels, Labeling, Toxicity, Carcinogen, Animal Test, Animal Testing, Test Results, Research Study, Inconclusive, Pasteurization, Public Acceptance, Controversy, Food and Drug Administration, FDA, World Health Organization, WHO, Dr. George Giddings, Isomedix Food Irradiation, Coalition for Food Irradiation, Ellen Haas, Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, Public Health, Public Safety, Electromagnetic Spectrum, Radioactivity, Law of

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CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

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Transcript

Irradiated Food: Is a Mango Exposed to Gamma Rays Safe to Eat?

JOHN PALMER, anchor:

Earlier this year, the food and drug administration okayed the use of radiation as a preservative for fruits and vegetables and these food stuffs are now beginning to show up on America's produce markets. This morning we ask if this irradiation process is quote "the greatest thing since pasteurization" or a potential menace to our health. Here's how it works. Fresh fruits and vegetables pass through a shielded chamber and are exposed to small amounts to gamma ray radiation before being shipped to the market. This kills insects, eliminating the need for lethal pesticides. It also keeps the food fresh much longer. Fruit or a vegetable with a shelf life of a day or two, once radiated, can last many days or even weeks without refrigeration. Joining us this morning to discuss this emotional issue is Dr. George Giddings whose company is in the business of irradiating food and in our Washington news room is Ellen Haas, head of Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, public interest organization and good morning to you both.

ELLEN HAAS (Public Voice for Food and Health Policy): Good morning.

PALMER: Doctor, is it completely safe, this process?

Dr. GEORGE GIDDINGS (Somedix Food Irradiation): Well, those who've studied it over the decades have come to that conclusion based on an unprecedented amount of hard scientific evidence, assuming, has convinced the Food and Drug Administration, the World Health Organization, really the entire responsible knowledgeable scientific and public health community that it is safe. Yes, indeed.

PALMER: Ms. Haas, if the federal government says that it's safe, what about that? What objections do

you have?

HAAS: The federal government has given its approval that it really has not been able to guarantee its safety. Their tests have not been animal tests. There's not been tests for toxicity or carcinogenicity. The problem is we don't know if it's safe or not and we're letting it in the marketplace.

PALMER: Has the public accepted this now – we have here some what – some mangos and these underwent this process.

Dr. GIDDINGS: That's correct.

PALMER: Now, when somebody comes into a market and you say this has been radiated, have you done studies? Are people gonna say "hey, wait a minute"? Or have they accepted this?

Dr. GIDDINGS: Well, really, the current market test that's going on at Lorenzo's Italian Center at North Miami Beach is intended to help answer that question. In other countries, where their food and radiation process is much further along, public acceptance has become widespread in numerous other countries.

HAAS: That's not quite true, George.

Dr. GIDDINGS: If I may finish please, Ellen, we're just at the point now in North America where we're really testing consumer acceptance along with the consumer education programs sphere-headed by the coalition for food radiation in Washington.

PALMER: Ms. Haas, you had something you wanna say.

HAAS: Yes. In fact, in Europe, many of the consumer organizations have opposed food or radiation just as consumer groups here in the United States are doing the same thing and if it does come into the marketplace, it's essential that it is labeled, "This food has been irradiated." When that happens, consumers are really concerned and I've seen public opinion polls where one in three say they will not buy it.

PALMER: Now, these mangos here have been irradiated. Is there any radiation in these mangos right now?

Dr. GIDDINGS: No, there never was. It's physically impossible, John, to induce any radioactivity in products being treated with this energy. So that's absolute law of physics that's impossible.

PALMER: But they're hit with the gamma rays.

Dr. GIDDINGS: That's correct.

PALMER: And that kills insects. Anything –

Dr. GIDDINGS: Just as gamma rays are used to treat cancer in radio teletherapy units using the same energy source material that we use in our processing plants.

PALMER: Ms. Haas, has there ever been an example of somebody who got sick from this?

HAAS: Unfortunately, the kind of tests that have been done hadn't been able to provide us with that kind of data. We don't have epidemiological tests or any kind of animal studies where we've been able to know that. It's important also to recognize that there is a change in the food from before and after it's been irradiated. There's a change in the texture of the fruit. There's a change in the nutrient values. Many cases in many fruits and vegetables, we have significant nutrient loss. For example, with Temple Oranges, there's 28 percent loss in Vitamin C. I think that should be a concern to consumers as well.

PALMER: Doctor, what about that? That's a big – if that's true, that's a big minus, isn't it, to lose

nutritional value from fruits and vegetables?

Dr. GIDDINGS: Compared to other treatments, this process is much milder on nutrients than any other food process a little energy is deposited in the products during processing. The points that Ellen raises are – have all been addressed and put aside really, addressed and answered in the FDA regulation that was published in mid-April of this year, within which it goes a great length to spell all of these allegations that have been raised about food and radiation. All one needs to do is read the regulation carefully. The answers to all of these allegations –

HAAS: However, those answers were not enough for Congressman Bosco and 41 members of the congress who have a piece of legislation now before the congress, really forcing an end to irradiation. I think that this is a controversial area and just because the Food and Drug Administration has given its approval is no guarantee of safety for the consumer.

Dr. GIDDINGS: Well, it's the only guarantee we have, Ellen. I don't know what your alternative might be. That's why these public health agencies, nationally and internationally, exist to assure that products that come into the marketplace be they new drugs or pharmaceuticals, medical devices, or food additives, are in this case a new process. This is the sole reason for being of the public health service and Food and Drug Administration. Who else to return to?

HAAS: Well, I think that we do have a controversy, not all the studies are conclusive and I think this is an area that needs more study before we rush into the marketplace and consumers bare the consequences of ill health 20 years down the pike.

Dr. GIDDINGS: Well, Ellen, you're throwing out loose allegations with no basis and fact is an unprecedented body of scientific data and information developed worldwide for decades that have just convinced the responsible, credible, competent scientific public health and medical community of the safety of this process.

PALMER: Ms. Haas, Dr. Giddings, I'm going to have to interrupt here. That's for being with us this morning.

HAAS: Thank you very much.

Dr. GIDDINGS: Thank you.