Dear Alice,

I recently received an alarming e-mail regarding the dangers of eating Canola oil. Apparently it is made from rapeseed, which is supposedly highly toxic and has been shown to develop cancer in rats. The e-mail also referred me to an article by a Tom Valentine called “The Canola Oil Report.” I located the report, read it, and quite frankly, threw out the remaining canola oil I had in the kitchen. Is there any truth to this article? And if there is, surely this is criminal.

Thank you,

?Confused

Answer

Dear Confused,

Canola oil comes from a hybrid plant developed in Canada during the late 1960s to early 1970s using traditional pedigree hybrid propagation techniques (not genetically modified) involving black mustard, leaf mustard, and turnip rapeseed. The original rapeseed plant was high in erucic acid, which is an unpalatable fatty acid having negative health effects in high concentrations. Canola oil contains less than 1 percent erucic acid. In fact, another name for canola oil is LEAR (Low Erucic Acid Rapeseed) oil.

Your confusion about canola oil's safety is understandable. While the Internet can be a great source of information, many rumors and urban legends have circulated on web sites and been passed along in e-mails. Urban legends usually warn of dire consequences from something perfectly innocent; they often relate a story about someone who had such a terrible experience with something, yet that person almost always remains anonymous. These often frightening stories or accusations usually lack enough detail to make scientific, logical evaluation of the claim. The scare tactics of canola oil fit into this scenario.

Some of the information circulating on the Internet states that canola oil causes endless maladies: joint pain, swelling, gum disease, constipation, hearing loss, heart disease, hair loss... the list goes on and on. Canola oil has undergone years of extensive testing to assure its safety. In truth, canola oil contains essential fatty acids that our bodies need and cannot make on their own. Over 90 percent of the fatty acids present is the long chain unsaturated variety that has been proven beneficial to health.
It has also been claimed that canola oil is used in making mustard gas, a poison. This is totally untrue. Actually, mustard gas doesn't even come from the mustard plant; it was so named because it smells similar to mustard. Canola oil has allegedly been used as an industrial lubricant and ingredient in fuels, soaps, paints, etc. The truth is that many vegetable oils, such as corn, soybean, and flax, are also used in these applications. That doesn't make those oils unhealthy or dangerous. Canola oil has also been accused of killing insects, such as aphids. Again, all other oils can do the same, not by poisoning insects, but by suffocating them.

In China, rapeseed oil cooked at very high temperatures was found to give off toxic emissions. In the U.S., the combination of refined oils, added antioxidants, and lower cooking temperatures prevents this from occurring. In China, the oil contains contaminants, is not refined, and has no antioxidants. Some people have blamed the Canadians for paying the United States government to have canola oil added to its GRAS (Generally Recognized As Safe) list. There is absolutely no evidence of this.

As you can see, misinformation can be used to scare people. Good thing you knew where to turn! For more information on canola oil, you can check out the Canola Council of Canada web site.

Alice!
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