

Are Anti-Irradiation Groups Making Our Food Less Safe?

John Stossel Challenges Those Who Claim Food Irradiation Is Unnecessary

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March 6, 2009

Many food producers want to expose your food to radiation -- zapping it with high levels of ionized rays. Why? Because doing so can protect you from food poisoning.



According to the Centers for Disease Control, fruits and vegetables have been approved for irradiation since 1986, and poultry irradiation was approved in 1990.

(AP Photo/Getty Images)

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says that, on average, more than 1 million Americans are poisoned every week by something they ate, and food poisoning kills about 5,000 people each year.

Rainer Mueller knows the real dangers of food poisoning because years ago, it happened to his son.

Watch the story Friday on "20/20" at 10 p.m. ET

"He ate a hamburger, got sick, and within 10 days was dead. Thirteen years old, never a chance to do anything," he said. "He was captain of the soccer team, a quality straight-A student. He was a great kid."

A grieving Mueller joined a group called [Safe Tables Our Priority](#) (STOP), which lobbies to mandate cleaner food, but then he discovered that totally clean food is often a myth.

With so much food-borne illness, why doesn't America irradiate more food?

Because radiation scares people.

"You hear irradiation and you think nuclear energy and you think of meltdowns," said nutritionist Ruth Kava of the [American Council on Science and Health](#). "Chernobyl, Three Mile Island -- all those, and yet it's nothing like that."

Years ago, small environmental groups held anti-irradiation protests, shouting things like, "Don't nuke our food!" and "Irradiation is unnecessary!"

They were successful at getting noticed and at getting other people to worry.

Wenonah Hauter, president of the protest group Food and Water Watch and author of "Zapped: Irradiation and the Death of Food," claims that irradiated food causes "cancer, premature death, and lower body weight."

Her group's Web site is [filled with citations of impressive-sounding studies](#), but when "20/20" looked at these studies, one actually said that irradiation has ["no adverse effects on the survival rate \[or\] body weight."](#)

"Well, there's a large body of evidence that shows that lab animals experience these problems," Hauter said.

The author of another study cited by Hunter said the Food and Water Watch claims "are a collection of half-truths, misunderstandings and misinterpretation."

"The author of the study works for a facility that gets government money to basically promote irradiation," Hauter shot back.

So does the author of the study not understand what his own study shows, or are activists like Hauter manipulating studies to scare people about something that would save lives?

"What my organization does is inform people so that they can make their own decisions about the food they eat," Hauter said.

Unnecessary Deaths?

Irradiation opponents also claim that irradiation destroys the quality of the food.

"You can't really irradiate a fruit or vegetable enough to kill the bacteria unless you want it to turn to mush," Hauter claimed. "It's been described as smelling like singed hair or tasting like wet dog."

Irradiation companies say that's nothing but lies, and to prove it they provided some samples of irradiated food for "20/20."

We offered samples of irradiated papaya to random people on the street to compare to regular papaya, and many even preferred the irradiated papaya. In fact, many said it tasted fresher and sweeter.

It may taste fresh and it might prevent millions of cases of food poisoning, but groups like Food and Water Watch have been so effective that today only a fraction of 1 percent of all beef and poultry is irradiated in the United States.

"We should be getting rid of the unnecessary causes of death that are easy to take care of," said nutritionist Kava. "And food irradiation could help do that."

Major health organizations like the [CDC](#), the [World Health Organization](#) and the [Food and Drug Administration](#) agree. They say that irradiation is safe, effective and would save lives.