



Irradiated Food in School Lunches



Background

On May 29, 2003, despite thousands of comments from parents, teachers, students, and concerned citizens who overwhelmingly opposed the purchase of irradiated food for the National School Lunch Program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) chose to include irradiated ground beef for federal nutrition programs. As of September 2004, irradiated ground beef is available to schools and costs 29-80 cents more per pound than non-irradiated ground beef. **However, school officials in each district can choose whether or not to purchase it for their schools.**

The possibility of irradiated food in schools began with the 2002 Farm Bill that was passed by Congress. The food irradiation industry was successful in inserting language into the bill that directs the Secretary of Agriculture not to prohibit the use of irradiated food in the National School Lunch Program. Previously, irradiated food had been prohibited from the program.

This provision attempts to accomplish legislatively what USDA could not achieve administratively in 2001. In the spring of 2001, the USDA issued revised specifications for commodity contracts for the National School Lunch Program that would permit the purchase of irradiated food for the program. A public outcry against the inclusion of irradiated food in the National School Lunch Program forced Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman to rescind the revised contract specifications.

Irradiation exposes food to high doses of ionizing radiation to kill bacteria. In the process, irradiation disrupts everything in its path, depleting vitamins and nutrients and causing the creation of new chemicals – some of which do not naturally occur in food and that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has never studied for safety. Research dating to the 1950s has revealed a wide range of problems in laboratory animals that ate irradiated foods, including premature death, cancer, stillbirths, genetic damage, organ malfunctions, stunted growth and vitamin deficiencies. Recent studies by the Federal Research Center in Germany found that one class of irradiation byproducts, called alkylcyclobutanones, caused genetic damage to human cells and promoted cancer development.

However, there is little research into the long-term health effects experienced by children who are exposed to toxic chemicals in foods. Nowhere in the world has there been a mass feeding of irradiated food to children over a prolonged period of time. Dr. William Au, a toxicologist at the University of Texas Medical Branch has argued that “the scientific community and regulatory agencies have very little knowledge regarding how children respond to insult from toxic chemicals. These concerns also apply to toxicological risk with respect to eating irradiated food.” This is significant, considering that children are more susceptible to toxic substances in their environment because they eat, drink and breathe much more than adults, pound for pound.

The USDA “encourages” schools serving irradiated ground beef to label it as irradiated and notify parents – but it does not require them to do so. This ignores parents, teachers, and students’ right to know what is being served in school lunches. In 2004, a California right-to-know law that would require public disclosure, parental notification, and school board approval prior to serving irradiated food in school lunches passed the CA legislature, but was vetoed by the Governor. Therefore, nationwide, parents and students can still be uninformed when irradiated food is served in school lunches.

Recently, there have been a few bright spots in the struggle against irradiated foods being pushed onto school children. In June 2004, Congress passed the Child Nutrition Act (CNA), which restricts school lunch use of irradiated food. Specifically, CNA states that irradiated food may be made available to school children only at the request of state and local school systems and that its use in school lunches cannot be mandated by the USDA; that irradiated food cannot be subsidized by the federal government; and that state and school food authorities are to be provided with factual information about irradiation, including notice that irradiation is not a substitute for safe food handling.

A number of states and schools are taking measures to keep irradiated food out of school lunches. As of September 2004, ten school districts, including Los Angeles and Washington DC, have outright banned irradiated food. Others, notably Seattle, have adopted strong directives discouraging the use of irradiated foods as part of a comprehensive healthy school lunch policy.

At the start of the 2004-2005 school year, only Minnesota, Nebraska, and Texas ordered irradiated ground beef for schools in their states. Ultimately, all three states withdrew their orders for irradiated ground beef, citing the product’s high cost and the inadequate information provided by the federal government.

Fans of irradiation (including the USDA) have been disappointed that irradiated ground beef has been so slow to catch on in school lunches – and they will continue to promote it to schools across the country. The best way to make sure that irradiated food stays out of your local schools is to work with your school board to adopt a formal policy on this and other school nutrition issues.



This is the “radura,” the symbol for Irradiated Foods
*The radura is only required on products in grocery stores