U.S. F.D.A. to Allow Radiation of Spinach, Lettuce

22 August 2008 (Reuters Health [Susan Hevey])—US health regulators have approved the use of ionizing radiation for fresh spinach and lettuce, saying the technique already approved for other foods can help control harmful bacteria and other pathogens.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said the radiation treatment also would make the leafy greens last longer and give them greater “shelf-life” for retailers and consumers.

The approval comes 2 years after Escherichia coli outbreaks linked to spinach and lettuce sold in grocery stores and served at various restaurants. Outbreaks of the dangerous bacteria sickened dozens of consumers and led some to be hospitalized.

In severe cases, patients developed kidney failure.

Since then, other outbreaks have affected a variety of products, most recently Salmonella contamination in hot peppers from Mexico that surfaced earlier this summer.

“In the aftermath of the recent outbreaks, FDA wanted to fast track an important tool to help industry improve the safety of fresh produce,” Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) spokesman Brian Kennedy said.

But FDA spokeswoman Stephanie Kwisnek said the agency was making its decision now because it had finished reviewing all the necessary data.

Industry groups initially sought the agency’s approval 8 years ago to clear a wide variety of foods, including various meats and produce, before amending their request to allow the agency to review certain foods first.

The FDA’s review of the other foods is still ongoing.

Foods already approved for radiation treatment include meat, poultry, spices, and molluscan shellfish, such as oysters, mussels, and clams, according to the agency.

About 76 million cases of E. coli and other types of food poisoning occur each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Patients stricken with a foodborne illness experience a wide variety of symptoms that can include abdominal cramps, vomiting, nausea, and diarrhea.

Spinach and lettuce are particularly susceptible to contaminants, because their textured leaves can provide “an ideal habitat” for pests and because they are usually eaten raw, the FDA said.

The agency granted the production change in response to a request by 2 industry groups, the National Food Processors Association (NFPA) and The Food Irradiation Coalition.

The GMA, in a statement, said radiation offered another tool to help improve produce safety. The group merged with the NFPA after the petition was filed, GMA’s Kennedy said.

The FDA’s ruling could impact a variety of produce companies, including Fresh Del Monte Produce Inc., Chiquita Brands International Inc., and privately-held Dole Food Company Inc., among others.

Despite the approval, it was not immediately clear if food manufacturers or retailers would soon begin using the technology amid concerns about costs and consumer reactions.

Radiating food, including leafy greens, does not appear to be dangerous, the FDA said in its notice.

“The overwhelming majority of studies showed no evidence of toxicity. On those few occasions when adverse effects were reported, FDA finds that those effects cannot be attributed to irradiation,” it said.

Spinach and lettuce that have been irradiated will have to carry a special “radura” logo and state the product has been “treated with radiation” or “treated by irradiation,” FDA’s Kwisnek said.

But some consumer groups cautioned against thinking irradiation is the sole step needed to protect against contaminants in leafy greens and other produce.

Other measures still need to be adopted, including many at the farm level before foods are even processed, the Center for Science in the Public Interest said.

Farmers should be required to maintain a written food safety plan, and the FDA should develop uniform standards for those plans and routinely inspect them, the nonprofit advocacy group said in a statement.

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Editor’s comment. It is about time. Although various advocacy groups will object, irradiation of food (especially leafy vegetables, other vegetables that are eaten raw, and fruits) is certainly one of the most effective ways of decreasing the number of gastrointestinal infections associated with these sources. Although meats, poultry, and some other foods have already been approved for irradiation, consumer acceptance has not been broad. Public education to emphasize the clear-cut advantages of irradiation versus the relatively weak theoretical disadvantages will be important. It took a long time for pasteurization of milk to be widely accepted. (D.K.)

U.S. Measles Cases Reach Highest Point since 1996

21 August 2008 (Reuters Health)—From January to July 2008, a total of 131 measles cases were reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the highest number seen during the same 7-month period since 1996. Nearly half of the cases involved patients who were not vaccinated due to parental philosophical or religious beliefs.

Although no deaths occurred, at least 15 patients, many of them young children, required hospitalization, CDC researchers
note in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* for 22 August.

“Measles can be a severe, life-threatening illness,” Dr. Anne Schuchat, director of the CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, said in a statement. “These cases and outbreaks serve as a reminder that measles can and still does occur in the US.”

Of the 131 cases, 112 involved individuals with an unvaccinated or unknown vaccination status. Of the 95 subjects who were eligible for vaccination, 65 went unvaccinated due to philosophical or religious beliefs.

Illinois had the most reported measles cases at 32, followed by New York with 27, and Washington with 19. Cases were also seen in Arizona; California; Wisconsin; Michigan; Hawaii; Arkansas; Washington, DC; Georgia; Louisiana; Missouri; New Mexico; Pennsylvania; and Virginia.

Seventeen of the cases were direct importations from other countries, and an additional 99 cases were epidemiologically tied to importation.

However, the increase in measles cases seen this year “was not the result of a greater number of imported cases, but was the result of greater viral transmission after importation into the United States, leading to a greater number of importation-associated cases,” the report concludes.

“These importation-associated cases have occurred largely among school-aged children who were eligible for vaccination but whose parents chose not to have them vaccinated.”


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**AIDS Drug Approved to Treat Hepatitis B Infection**

12 August 2008 (Reuters Health)—The AIDS drug Viread (tenofovir disoproxil fumarate) received US regulatory approval for treating adults with chronic hepatitis B, Gilead Sciences said.

Gilead estimates that >400 million people worldwide have the disease, which is most prevalent in Asian countries. It is the leading cause of liver cancer and complications kill up to 1.2 million people per year.

Viread is a once-daily tablet that works by blocking an enzyme necessary for the virus to replicate in liver cells.

The drug has been available in the United States as a treatment for HIV infection in adults since 2001.

Gilead already markets another hepatitis B drug, Hepsera.

“Compared to the available drugs,” RBC Capital Markets analyst Jason Kantor said, “Viread is likely to be considered best-in-class based on its potency, resistance profile, long-term safety, and price.”


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**Editor’s comment.** These results are very disappointing. We would have liked to be able to assume that all children (the future adults) had been immunized against hepatitis B. (D.K.)