

Dietician Weighs In On Arsenic In Food

(Newswise) — Recent reports about arsenic in rice have sparked a great deal of panic among U.S. consumers. However, the average American who eats a variety of whole grains doesn't need to stress about arsenic, according to Loyola University Health System registered dietitian Brooke Schantz, MS, RD, CSSD, LDN.

Consumer Reports recently completed an investigation, which found that white rice grown in Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri and Texas had higher levels of total arsenic compared with other rice samples. The report also revealed that brown rice contains higher levels of total arsenic compared with white rice, and arsenic levels are 44 percent higher in consumers who eat rice compared with those who do not. These findings are being used to encourage the United States Food and Drug Administration to set limits for arsenic in our food.

"It is possible to limit your exposure to arsenic in your food through a balanced diet," Schantz said. "More vulnerable populations or those who consume a higher amount of rice due to dietary preferences or needs, such as infants, pregnant women, vegans, vegetarians or individuals with celiac disease, are at greater risk for consuming excessive amounts of arsenic in rice."

Arsenic is an element that occurs in inorganic and organic forms. Both types of arsenic can be found in water, food, soil and air. Inorganic forms of arsenic (arsenate and arsenite) are known carcinogens and are toxic to the body.

Rice plants normally take up silicon from the soil to help strengthen their stems and husks. However, the chemical structure of silicon and arsenic look very similar. Therefore, in growing conditions that have higher amounts of arsenic in the soil and water, rice plants mistakenly take up arsenic instead of silicon from the surrounding environment.

To reduce your intake of arsenic, Schantz recommends consuming a diet with a variety of whole grains and watching your portion sizes. She also suggests thoroughly rinsing off raw rice before cooking it. Also, use a ratio of six cups of water to one cup of rice and drain the excess water.

"The truth is we don't currently know what amount of organic and inorganic arsenic is even absorbed into our bodies from specific foods made from rice nor do we know enough about long-term exposure to low levels of arsenic to set limits," Schantz said. "There likely have been high concentrations of arsenic in our food for centuries; we have just only now begun to properly detect it in our food."

The FDA is collecting and analyzing data of more than 1,000 rice and rice-containing products before setting limits or future regulations. The agency reported that it would be premature to recommend modifying diets because of arsenic levels until a more thorough analysis is complete.

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