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Doctor Links a Man's Illness to a Microwave Popcorn Habit

By [GARDINER HARRIS](#)

A fondness for microwave buttered popcorn may have led a 53-year-old Colorado man to develop a serious lung condition that until now has been found only in people working in popcorn plants.

Lung specialists and even a top industry official say the case, the first of its kind, raises serious concerns about the safety of microwave butter-flavored popcorn.

"We've all been working on the workplace safety side of this, but the potential for consumer exposure is very concerning," said John B. Hallagan, general counsel for the Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association of the United States, a trade association of companies that make butter flavorings for popcorn producers. "Are there other cases out there? There could be."

A spokeswoman for the [Food and Drug Administration](#) said that the agency was considering the case as part of a review of the safety of diacetyl, which adds the buttery taste to many microwave popcorns, including Orville Redenbacher and Act II.

Producers of microwave popcorn said their products were safe.

"We're incredibly interested in learning more about this case. However, we are confident that our product is safe for consumers' normal everyday use in the home," said Stephanie Childs, a spokeswoman for ConAgra Foods, the nation's largest maker of microwave popcorn.

Ms. Childs said ConAgra planned to remove diacetyl from its microwave popcorn products "in the near future."

Pop Weaver, another large microwave popcorn producer, has already taken diacetyl out of its popcorn bags "because of consumer concerns" but not because the company believes the chemical is unsafe for consumers, said Cathy Yingling, a company spokeswoman.

The case will most likely accelerate calls on Capitol Hill for the Bush administration to crack down on the use of diacetyl. The [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) has been criticized as doing little to protect workers in popcorn plants despite years of studying the issue.

"The government is not doing anything," said Representative Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat who leads a subcommittee with jurisdiction over the food and drug agency's budget.

Exposure to synthetic butter in food production and flavoring plants has been linked to hundreds of cases of workers whose lungs have been damaged or destroyed. Diacetyl is found naturally in milk, cheese, butter and other products.

Heated diacetyl becomes a vapor and, when inhaled over a long period of time, seems to lead the small airways in the lungs to become swollen and scarred. Sufferers can breathe in deeply, but they have difficulty exhaling. The severe form of the disease is called bronchiolitis obliterans or “popcorn workers’ lung,” which can be fatal.

Dr. Cecile Rose, director of the occupational disease clinical programs at National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, said that she first saw the Colorado man in February after another doctor could not figure out what was causing his distress. Dr. Rose described the case in a recent letter to government agencies.

A furniture salesman, the man was becoming increasingly short of breath. He had never smoked and was overweight. His illness had been diagnosed as hypersensitivity pneumonitis, an inflammation of the lungs usually caused by chronic exposure to bacteria, mold or dust. Farmers and bird enthusiasts are frequent sufferers.

But nothing in the Colorado man’s history suggested that he was breathing in excessive amounts of mold or bird droppings, Dr. Rose said. She has consulted to flavorings manufacturers for years about “popcorn workers’ lung,” and said that something about the man’s tests appeared similar to those of the workers.

“I said to him, ‘This is a very weird question, but bear with me. But are you around a lot of popcorn?’ ” Dr. Rose asked. “His jaw dropped and he said, ‘How could you possibly know that about me? I am Mr. Popcorn. I love popcorn.’ ”

The man told Dr. Rose that he had eaten microwave popcorn at least twice a day for more than 10 years.

“When he broke open the bags, after the steam came out, he would often inhale the fragrance because he liked it so much,” Dr. Rose said. “That’s heated diacetyl, which we know from the workers’ studies is the highest risk.”

Dr. Rose measured levels of diacetyl in the man’s home after he made popcorn and found levels of the chemical were similar to those in microwave popcorn plants. She asked the man to stop eating microwave popcorn.

“He was really upset that he couldn’t have it anymore,” Dr. Rose said. “But he complied.”

Six months later, the man has lost 50 pounds and his lung function has not only stopped deteriorating but has actually improved slightly, Dr. Rose said.

“This is not a definitive causal link, but it raises a lot of questions and supports the recommendation that more work needs to be done,” Dr. Rose said.

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