

By John Gushue
Science and Technology Writer
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The scene is bright, fresh, and alive. Three ultra-thin Madonna clones bounce along a busy avenue, skipping to their favourite beat, draped in their favourite fashions, and drinking their favourite drink. That's Diet Coke, and they love it. You can tell by just looking at them. This commercial is beamed daily into millions of homes and you can bet the people love Diet Coke too. More importantly, they love aspartame, the 'natural' sweetener that's turning the food industry upside down.

The reasons why these would-be Madonnas love Diet Coke — and approximately 70 other soft drinks, desserts, and calorie-conscious foods in which aspartame is found — are obvious. When the non-nutritive saccharin had been banned and then re-approved for commercial use in the United States following charges of being carcinogenic, America looked for something new to satisfy its sweet tooth. Protests from dentists and health food advocates, as well as then-record high prices, were scaring consumers from sugar, so been known of for years, but never approved by the powerful Food and Drug Administration until 1981. And unlike saccharin which left a metallic, bitter aftertaste, aspartame provides a pleasant, sweet sensation.

For G. D. Searle and Co., the San Francisco conglomerate that produces aspartame for about 60 million consumers in Canada and the U.S., the results are also pleasant and sweet. The company sold more than three tons of the sweetener in 1984, and company profits from aspartame alone are predicted to soon exceed \$1 billion per year. People, especially children, young women, and dieters, have taken the aspartame challenge, and everyone seems to have won.

Aspartame was approved for legal use in the U.S. and Canada almost five years ago, and since then has found a warm spot in many hearts. Yet aspartame is not loved by all of its users, and some critics say no to consumer products containing the additive until more tests are done.

Ron Leonard, director of the Community Nutrition Institute in Washington, D.C., says there are too many unanswered questions about aspartame's safety to rest easy. Leonard and the CNI are calling for a temporary aspartame ban until independent studies prove the additive is safe for public consumption.

"We want aspartame removed from store shelves, put simply. There are too many outstanding issues that must be resolved," he said.

While clinical studies have shown the sweetener should not be used by some groups, such as pregnant women and small children, more and more aspartame users are ending their love affair with the controversial sweetener.

When Pat Tobin, now a graduate student at Carleton University in Ottawa, saw a new fleet of diet soft drinks flood supermarkets in 1981, she saw a new solution to her weight problems.

"I didn't look at it like a diet pill, but I thought I could fill up on it — that there would be no calories," Tobin says. She took an immediate liking to the aspartame-sweetened drinks, though soon found her fondness had soured into what she now calls an addiction. However, officials at the Donwood Institute and the Addiction Research Centre, both of Toronto, say there is no known evidence supporting the theory aspartame is addictive, and that caffeine may be responsible. Tobin, a recovering alcoholic, disagrees.

"I have one soft drink, and then I want another. I know a physical addiction when I have one, and I'm addicted to Diet Coke. Besides, I hate coffee, and I don't eat chocolate," says Tobin. She says she was drinking about eight cans a day last fall, "depending on how broke I was."

Tobin has other complaints about aspartame. Since giving up the sweetener in January, Tobin says her health has improved. "My sleeping habits cleared up immediately — I didn't have a night in years where I didn't wake up at least six times. But it went away just like that," she says.

"I also have a better taste for foods, I'm not nearly as edgy or jumpy, and it's easier to hold my train of thought."

Tobin said her experiences with aspartame and recent studies on the sweetener indicate the additive is not safe. "Someone told me that aspartame changes the firing order of neurons, and that scared the shit out of me. I found I'd leave the last letter from a word when I was writing — it was regular enough to make me wonder," she says.

Leonard says most of Tobin's complaints have been found elsewhere many times before. "Dizziness is quite common, as well as very severe and continuing headaches that medication can't seem to affect," he said.

Leonard says the 18 studies

currently investigating aspartame show the additive's safety is questionable, although the respected American Medical Association approved use of the sweetener last summer.

"If you assume the AMA found no problem, then why are there these studies? Aspartame shouldn't be on the market until they are completed," he said.

The AMA decision was a re-evaluation of original studies that led to aspartame's approval in the States. As is accepted practice, the original studies were conducted by the manufacturer. Leonard said the AMA's findings were inconclusive, and relied too much on Searle for information. "I think the AMA was influenced by Searle — they went along with them all

the way," he said.

The AMA report did observe that some "individuals may have an unusual sensitivity" to aspartame, notably young children, pregnant women, and people with phenylketonuria, or PKU, a rare genetic disease.

"Although use needs to be monitored for PKU, the AMA concluded that there was evidence of danger to the general public," said Harold Lubin of the AMA's Chicago headquarters. But Leonard says the AMA investigation failed to review widespread complaints about the sweetener.

"The AMA is being very cavalier about all of it. It's as if they're playing some sort of high-stake poker game," Leonard said.

Richard Wurtman, a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, found some serious epileptic attacks are related to aspartame consumption. According to Wurtman, aspartame lowers levels in the brain that guard against seizures, making the additive a serious risk to people vulnerable to seizures. Other research has shown rats given large doses of aspartame developed uterine polyps, or small, non-cancerous growths.

Leonard says more people may know of the potential dangers of aspartame once a public forum sponsored by senator Howard Metzenbaum is launched. He also

Aspartame sells a lifestyle at the

