



Friday, 22 Jun 2007

GO

Stuff > Story

Chewing gum habit 'poisons' woman

By RUTH HILL - The Dominion Post | Thursday, 21 June 2007

Abigail Cormack thought she was dying from a mystery illness. She never realised her daily chewing gum habit was probably poisoning her.

The sugar-free gum contained aspartame, a food additive widely used in thousands of products, including gum, diet soft-drinks and tea and coffee.

The additive is prompting debate in the international medical world about its safety.

When Ms Cormack, 25, of Wellington, began suffering crippling muscle cramps and tingling in her hands and feet about five months ago, she feared she was having a heart attack.

She started suffering heart palpitations, anxiety attacks, depression and skin rashes, was unable to sleep and had to take sick leave.

But, despite a battery of tests, doctors could not pinpoint the cause.

"They thought it might be a salt imbalance, maybe I was over-training at the gym.

"I was prescribed anti-inflammatories and Valium to help me sleep but it just got worse and worse. I thought I was dying."

Finally, an internet site alerted her to the possibility of aspartame poisoning.

Under the brandname NutraSweet, aspartame is used in more than 5000 foods and beverages worldwide.

For the past few years, Ms Cormack has chewed through up to four packets of chewing gum a day.

She did not suspect the seemingly innocuous habit could be slowly poisoning her.

Aspartame is digested into aspartic acid, phenylalanine and methanol, which converts into formaldehyde - a deadly neurotoxin used as embalming fluid.

The food industry says these are all "naturally occurring" substances in foods and the amounts are too small to be harmful.

No study has found a definitive link between the compounds and serious effects in humans, but some research has found higher incidences of chronic fatigue, migraines and other conditions.

Ms Cormack admits her chewing gum consumption was "excessive".

"But there were no warnings it could be doing me harm."

Her GP, Penny Rowley, was at the point of referring her to a neurologist when she heard about the gum habit.

She confirmed aspartame poisoning as the likely culprit, and within 24 hours of giving up gum, Ms Cormack's symptoms disappeared.

Dr Rowley said it was the first case she had seen.

"I was certainly surprised but it seems to have worked."

Clinical pharmacologist Professor Carl Burgess, from the Wellington School of Medicine, said that though someone would have to take "megadoses" of aspartame for it to be toxic, some people were more susceptible to allergic reactions.

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority says there is no scientific evidence of any significant harm from a large daily intake of aspartame.

Email a Friend | Printable View | Have Your Say



PHIL REID/Dominion Post

HEALTH WORRIES: Abigail Cormack, 25, suffered adverse effects from chewing gum.

Related Links

- [Subscribe to Archivistuff](#)
- [Have your say](#)

Advertisement

It's not a credit card but it does give you credit card features, and the chance to win tickets to the Rugby World Cup 2007 with Visa!

Westpac

TM © Rugby World Cup Limited. 1986-2007. All rights reserved.

Advertisement


- Email alerts
- Text alerts
- RSS Feeds
- Make Stuff.co.nz my homepage

Stuff Headlines

- Bain 'annoyed' over murder retrial ruling
- Central Otago cut off by icy weather
- Trio jailed over great-grandmother's firebomb death
- Charges against Graeme Burton dropped
- Bashed girl saw 'white light' with each blow, court told
- Bain's team puts brave face on retrial
- Blog calls for attacks on tourists in Fiji
- If you snooze, you lose - your job that is

Game On

 Lindsay Knight: Drop goal exponent a vital World Cup ingredient

 Kiwi cyclist finds European switch a real eye-opener

[» MORE SPORT STORIES](#)

Sponsored Links

- [Looking at exporting?](#)
- [99 cent Calling Special this Sunday](#)
- [Need business advice? Get a mentor](#)

Opinion Poll



Have you ever fallen asleep at work?

See story

- Yes
- No
- I was just resting my eyes!

[VOTE](#) [RESULTS](#)



NZ by the numbers (PDFs)

A numerical portrait of New Zealand


Cartoon Gallery




Brush with death - Mike Moreu

[See cartoon gallery](#)

Sponsored Links

 [AKL-SYD from only \\$177 o/w pp](#)
All Inclusive HOT DEAL!
[houseoftravel.co.nz](#)

 The all-new MINI ONE.
The one under \$30,000.

Features

 Journey to the Disney Vault

Next Story:
[- More Stuff Stories](#)

[Email a Friend](#) | [Printable View](#) | [Have Your Say](#)

