Nation of Change

Diet's hidden dangers: Unveiling PFAS in everyday foods

A groundbreaking study reveals how processed meats, teas, and restaurant meals could be stealthily elevating PFAS levels in our bodies, shedding light on the unseen chemical consequences of our dietary choices.

By **Alexandra Jacobo** February 23, 2024

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A groundbreaking study by the University of Southern California (USC)'s Keck School of Medicine has unveiled a significant link between diet and elevated levels of PFAS, also known as "forever chemicals," in human blood. The study specifically points to processed meats, hot dogs, teas, and restaurant-prepared foods as potential culprits in the accumulation of these hazardous substances in the body.

PFAS, short for Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are a vast group of man-made chemicals prevalent in a myriad of consumer products, including food packaging, nonstick cookware, and waterproof clothing. Their nickname, "forever chemicals," stems from their persistent nature, resisting natural degradation and thus contaminating water, air, soil, and living organisms.

The USC-led research underscores a direct correlation between dietary habits and PFAS exposure, suggesting that certain food consumption can lead to incremental buildup of these chemicals in humans. "The main takeaway is not to demonize certain foods or say, 'Oh my gosh, this food is so unhealthy.' The point is to highlight that we need more testing of these foods, and this gives us an avenue to say, 'OK, these foods may have higher levels of PFAS so we should do more targeted monitoring of them,'" explained Hailey Hampson, the study's lead author and a doctoral student at Keck.

The study analyzed two distinct groups of young adults: 123 participants, predominantly Hispanic, from the Southern California Children's Health Study (CHS), and a "nationally representative sample" of 604 young adults from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Study (NHANES). Researchers discovered that consuming foods typically found in restaurants or processed foods was associated with heightened PFAS levels in the body.

Jesse A. Goodrich, senior author of the study and an assistant professor at Keck, remarked, "To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine how dietary factors are associated with changes in PFAS over time. Looking at multiple time points gives us an idea of how changing people's diets might actually impact PFAS levels."

Participants provided detailed accounts of their dietary habits, including the frequency of consuming dark green vegetables, bread, milk, sports drinks, tea, and the extent of their consumption of fast-food, non-fast-food restaurant meals, and home-cooked foods. The objective was to estimate their exposure to food packaging, a known source of PFAS contamination.

Blood samples taken from the participants revealed significant findings. For instance, individuals from the CHS group who reported higher tea consumption during the initial study phase exhibited elevated PFAS levels at the follow-up. Similarly, increased pork intake was linked to higher levels of specific PFAS compounds.

Conversely, the study found that home-cooked meals had a protective effect against PFAS accumulation. Every additional serving of home-prepared foods was associated with a decrease in certain PFAS compounds, underscoring the potential role of food packaging in PFAS exposure.

The pervasiveness of PFAS in food packaging has prompted calls for stricter regulations. Last year, the California attorney general issued an advisory letter urging manufacturers of paper straws and food packaging to disclose PFAS levels in their products. "That's a really good step in the right direction, and our findings highlight the need for more of those types of regulations across the country," Goodrich stated.

The study, published in the journal Environment International, emphasizes the critical need for comprehensive monitoring and testing of various foods and beverages for PFAS contamination. Hampson noted, “We’re starting to see that even foods that are metabolically quite healthy can be contaminated with PFAS. These findings highlight the need to look at what constitutes ‘healthy’ food in a different way.”

This research sheds light on the complex relationship between diet and PFAS exposure, urging a reevaluation of what is considered “healthy” food and calling for enhanced regulatory measures to protect public health from the insidious threat of forever chemicals.

Alexandra Jacobo

Alexandra Jacobo is a dedicated progressive writer, activist, and mother with a deep-rooted passion for social justice and political engagement. Her journey into political activism began in 2011 at Zuccotti Park, where she supported the Occupy movement by distributing blankets to occupiers, marking the start of her earnest commitment to progressive causes. Driven by a desire to educate and inspire, Alexandra focuses her writing on a range of progressive issues, aiming to foster positive change both domestically and internationally. Her work is characterized by a strong commitment to community empowerment and a belief in the power of informed public action. As a mother, Alexandra brings a unique and personal perspective to her activism, understanding the importance of shaping a better world for future generations. Her writing not only highlights the challenges we face but also champions the potential for collective action to create a more equitable and sustainable world.