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DH advice for toddlers and young children (1 – 5 years) to avoid rice drinks due to risk of exposure to inorganic arsenic

The Food Standards Agency has today announced the results of a survey of total and inorganic arsenic levels in 60 samples of rice drinks available in the UK. Rice drink (also known as rice milk) is a blend of filtered water and rice and is usually marketed as either a 'dairy free-alternative to cows' milk' or a 'low-fat drink' and are usually often consumed by those who wish to avoid dairy foods. Some toddlers and young children who are allergic to cows' milk and soya drink are currently advised to use calcium fortified rice drinks.

Arsenic occurs naturally at low levels as organic and inorganic forms in a wide range of foods. Most arsenic in the diet is present in the less harmful organic form but the inorganic form is known to cause cancer. Low levels of inorganic arsenic were detected in rice drinks (12 µg/kg of rice drink). None of the samples tested in the survey were above the legal limits. The Committee on Toxicity has not been able to set specific thresholds of exposure (tolerable intakes) for inorganic arsenic, and has advised that exposure to arsenic should be as low as reasonably practicable.

Toddlers/young children may be particularly vulnerable, because of their proportionally higher milk intake and are likely to have higher dietary exposure to inorganic arsenic per kilogram of body weight. A toddler/young child consuming about half a pint of rice drink a day, (instead of cows' milk) is likely to double his total dietary exposure to inorganic arsenic. Therefore, as a precaution, the Department advises against the substitution of breast milk, infant formula, cows' milk or soya drink with rice drinks for toddlers and young children aged 1-5 years.

The Department's advice is that:

- All toddlers and young children (aged 1-5 years) should not be given rice drinks in order to minimise their exposure to inorganic arsenic.
- This is a precautionary measure to minimise children's exposure to arsenic. Parents who have given their children rice drinks should be reassured that there is no immediate risk of harmful effects but in order to reduce further exposure to inorganic arsenic, they should stop giving rice drinks to toddlers and young children.
- Parents of toddlers and young children with diagnosed allergy to cows' milk and soya drink who are currently consuming rice drinks should be advised of suitable alternatives such as fully hydrolysed infant formula or oat or almond drinks. Growth and development of these children should be monitored and parents should receive specific dietary advice to ensure that their nutritional needs particularly of calcium are met through a diversified diet.
- Parents of toddlers and young children who are lactose-intolerant or who have galactosaemia should be advised to give their infant lactose-free formula.

Further details of the FSA survey of rice and rice products is available on www.food.gov.uk

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