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Pesticide Poisoning From Watermelon

A physician, 59, and his wife, 60, bought a striped watermelon from California at a local, large, chain grocery store on July 3, 1985. The doctor, "a Georgia boy," prided himself on knowing a good watermelon when he thumped one. The couple, their son, 29, and a female house guest, 61, ate approximately 3/4 of the melon at approximately 9:00 p.m., July 4. Less than 1 hour later the wife, who had angina pectoris and myocardial infarction previously, got tightness in the chest, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and severe diarrhea with pieces of watermelon recognizable in the liquid flux. Diarrhea persisted for 12 hours. The physician got abdominal pain, tenesmus, loose stools, and hesitancy of urination within 90 minutes of eating the melon but was well the next morning. The house guest developed nausea, vomiting, cramps, and a few loose stools that night and the next morning. The son ate 2 pieces of melon with the others on July 4 but went straight to bed. He slept undisturbed but arose at 6:00 a.m. July 5 and consumed 2 more pieces. Within 45 minutes he experienced nausea and vomiting and quickly had 4 watery stools with watermelon in it. He also noted giddiness, smothering sensations and whistling noises in his chest. He was not asthmatic. Symptoms lasted for 2 hours. None of the four had blurred vision, dysarthria, or ataxia. The watermelon contained 3 parts per million of the pesticide, Aldicarb.

Thirty-two residents of Anchorage from 17 households, and 2 residents of Copper Center became ill between June 25 and July 4 from eating watermelon purchased in Anchorage between June 25 and July 4, 1985. Watermelons were bought from 6 different stores of one large chain of groceries and from 4 different stores of another chain. Aldicarb, a systemic pesticide known to be highly acutely toxic, was found in watermelons from 3 stores from the first chain. These watermelons caused illness in 6 individuals--Aldicarb levels were 3.0 ppm, and 1.25 ppm, and 1.20 ppm, respectively.

Persons ill were from 5 to 71 years of age; 5 were less than 12 years old. Symptoms were principally abdominal pain, often cramping in nature, nausea, vomiting, and intense watery diarrhea. Pieces of watermelon in the liquid stool were noticed by several persons. Chest pain or chest tightness was noted by a few. Two of these had known coronary heart disease and thought that the pain was like their angina. Some had smothering feelings or dyspnea. One noted wheezing. A few complained of twitches about the face, dizziness, slurring of speech, and headache. Several noted staggering, weakness, or pain or tingling in the limbs. One noted blurred vision. In general, the more tainted watermelon one ate, the sicker he or she became. One patient was pregnant; in fact, the nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea led to diagnosis of early intrauterine pregnancy. Pregnancy continues at 10 weeks, one month after the illness. This patient's husband also became ill. Symptoms among the 34 cases usually began within 2 hours and persisted for less than 3 hours. Symptoms resolved in less than 72 hours in all instances unless melon continued to be eaten. Recovery was complete. Few called physicians. None were hospitalized.

Aldicarb contamination of California watermelons received nationwide publicity when illness associated with watermelon consumption in California and Oregon was confirmed in late June and early July, 1985. On Friday, July 5, DEC issued a warning to Alaskans and banned the sale of California watermelon. As cases of illness mounted over the weekend of July 6-7, California issued a recall of the California watermelon crop. During the next two weeks, more than 225,000 lbs of California watermelon were destroyed in Alaska.

In addition to the 34 cases of illness enumerated by the MOA, the Epidemiology Office received reports of 13 people from Soldotna, Tok, Sitka, Fairbanks, Denali Park, and Glennallen who had onset of illness within two hours of ingesting striped watermelon purchased between June 25-July 4, 1985. All individuals had symptoms compatible with Aldicarb poisoning and recovered uneventfully within 72 hours of onset of illness. Beginning July 9, at the request of the California Health Department, the Epidemiology Office established ongoing surveillance activities to detect any new episodes of illness occurring among individuals eating watermelon purchased after July 9. No such cases of illness have been detected. Rapid action by public health agencies to ban watermelon sales plus widespread dissemination of information about the pesticide contamination undoubtedly prevented hundreds of additional individuals from becoming ill.

(Submitted by Rodman Wilson, M.D., Deputy Director, Department of Health and Human Services, Municipality of Anchorage; Reported by Joe Cladouhos, Kit Ballentine, and Cory Willis, Department of Environmental Conservation.)