

# Cancer Risks in French Fries, Bread

By Peter Starck

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STOCKHOLM—Basic foods eaten by millions around the world such as bread, biscuits, potato chips and french fries contain alarmingly high quantities of acrylamide, a substance believed to cause cancer, Swedish scientists said.

The research, carried out at Stockholm University in co-operation with experts at Sweden's National Food Administration, a government food safety agency, showed that the heating of carbohydrate-rich foods, such as potatoes, rice or cereals formed acrylamide, a much studied substance classified as a probable human carcinogen.

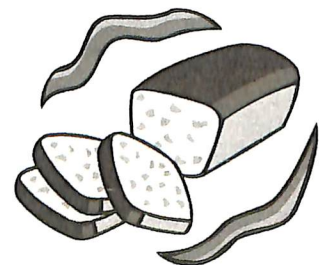
The research was deemed so important that the scientists decided on the unusual step of going public with their findings before the research had been officially published in an academic journal.

"I have been in this field for 30 years and I have never seen anything like this before," said Leif Busk, head of the food administration's research department.

The research findings showed that an ordinary bag of potato chips may contain up to 500 times more of the substance than the maximum levels in drinking water allowed by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

French fries sold at Swedish franchises of U.S. fast-food chains Burger King and McDonald's contained about 100 times the one microgram per liter maximum permitted by WHO for drinking water, the study showed.

One milligram, or 0.001 grams, contains 1,000 micrograms.



## Known Hazard

The Environmental Protection Agency classifies acrylamide, a colourless, crystalline solid, as a probable, medium-hazard human carcinogen.

According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer, acrylamide induces gene mutations and has been found in animal tests to cause benign and malignant stomach tumors. It is also known to cause damage to the central and peripheral nervous system.

"The discovery that acrylamide is formed during the preparation of food, and at high levels, is new knowledge. It may now be possible to explain some of the cases of cancer caused by food," Busk said.

"Fried, oven-baked and deep-fried potato and cereal products may contain high levels of acrylamide," the administration said.

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Among products analysed in the study were potato chips made by Finn-

ish company Chips ABP, whose shares fell 14.5 percent to six-month lows, as well as breakfast cereals made by US Kellogg, Quaker Oats, part of PepsiCo, and Swiss Nestlé, and Old El Paso tortilla chips.

"For us, these are completely new findings which have never before been known to the world's foodstuffs industry," Chips ABP said in a statement to the Helsinki stock exchange. Stefan Eriksson, marketing manager of Burger King's subsidiary in Sweden, said: "We have received the information and we are evaluating what it will mean."

Spokespersons for the other companies mentioned in the research were not immediately available for comment.

## No Products Withdrawn

The product analysis, however, which was based on more than 100 random samples, was not extensive enough for the administration to recommend the withdrawal of any products from supermarket shelves.

"Frying at high temperatures or for a long time should be avoided," Busk said, adding, "Our advice to eat less fat-rich products such as French fries and crisps remains valid."

The findings applied worldwide, not only to Sweden, as the food raw



materials used in the analyses had showed no traces of acrylamide, Busk noted.

Swedish authorities have informed the European Commission and EU member countries, Busk said.

"It is the first time we have come across such a result. We will evaluate this study and look at it but it is important to say that Sweden has not withdrawn any products from the market," said European Commission spokeswoman Beate Gminder.

"Therefore we'll have to see what the scientific evaluation by our side and by scientists in the member states will bring about," she said.

Liliane Abramsson-Zetterberg, a toxicologist at the Swedish food administration, said, "The cancer risk from acrylamide is much higher than (the levels) we accept for known carcinogens."

But smoking, which is known to cause cancer, remained a bigger risk, she said.

Source: Cancerpage.com, <http://www.cancerpage.com/cancernews/cancernews4241.htm>, 24 April 2002

