

## Fake fat gets FDA's okay

Last week, the Food and Drug Administration approved the use of olestra, a synthetic fat substitute, but only in snack foods. Procter & Gamble, the Cincinnati-based creator of olestra, has given it the trade name Olean. A compound of fatty acids and sugar, olestra is neither absorbed nor digested in the body and therefore contributes no calories to foods (SN: 1/27/96, p. 61).

Announcing the action, FDA Commissioner David Kessler acknowledged olestra's shortfalls. "Olestra may cause abdominal cramping and loose stools in some individuals, and [it] inhibits the body's absorption of certain fat-soluble vitamins and nutrients," he says. FDA states that it will require Procter & Gamble to label all foods containing olestra with a warning of those ill effects.

Nevertheless, the agency decided that olestra is safe.

Procter & Gamble, which introduced Crisco shortening in 1911, plans to test-market a line of olestra-containing foods, such as potato chips, cheese puffs, and club crackers, during the next few months. Eventually, the company will put Olean in a broad variety of snack products, says spokesperson Wendy W. Jacques. She says foods made with Olean have the "great taste" of real fat without the added calories.

Yet critics have denounced FDA's action on olestra.

"I find it incredible that Dr. Kessler would certify this food additive as safe," says Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer group based in Washington, D.C.

Jacobson notes that many prominent scientists have warned FDA of olestra's ill effects, including its ability to rob the body of key nutrients called carotenoids. Researchers have reported evidence that carotenoids, which are found in fresh fruits and vegetables, protect against certain cancers and other serious diseases.

— K.A. Fackelmann