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FDA Approves Irradiation Treatment

The Food and Drug Administration announced on Aug. 21 that it has approved the use of irradiation for lettuce and spinach, saying that zapping the food with a small amount of radiation is an effective way to prevent outbreaks of E.coli and other deadly pathogens. The ruling comes in the wake of recent salmonella scares and the 2006 E.coli-contaminated spinach outbreak, which killed three people.

In making the announcement, the FDA released this statement: "Irradiating fresh iceberg lettuce and spinach will help protect consumers from disease-causing bacteria. Infections from bacteria such as Salmonella and Escherichia coli O157:H7 (E. coli) continue to be a public health problem in the United States. Illnesses from these bacteria range from uncomfortable symptoms to life-threatening health problems. Severe illness from E. coli, for example, can lead to kidney failure."

But some in the food industry are not convinced that irradiation will keep the U.S. food supply safe. "It's the latest in a series of PR moves designed to mislead the public from the fact that the government is asleep at the wheel here," Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, an organic food watchdog group, told the *Chicago Tribune*.

The ruling is not a requirement for lettuce and spinach, but will be allowed on a voluntary basis. Companies must first seek the FDA's approval to use irradiation, and products treated with irradiation will have a logo and a disclaimer letting consumers know the product has been treated with radiation. The FDA claims that proper irradiation treatment will not deplete food of vital nutrients.

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