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Story URL: <http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/news.aspx?id=148235>

Story Retrieval Date: 11/22/2009 5:46:13 PM CST



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*"I had the prescription that said no soy products, and they still denied me a diet. I just cant understand why," former inmate Thomas Salonis told a press conference in Chicago last week.*

### Illinois inmates fight soy sentence in lawsuit

by CASSIE WIERENGA

**Nov 19, 2009**

Inmates from Illinois prisons are claiming they are victims of cruel and unusual punishment from an unlikely source - soy.

Eight inmates from the Illinois Department of Corrections have filed a lawsuit against the state of Illinois and 34 other defendants for forcing them to eat a diet based predominantly on soy protein and refusing to acknowledge or treat the health problems caused by the soy. The prisoners claim the diet is causing a variety of problems, including severe digestive disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, and hypothyroidism.

The Department of Corrections declined to comment. "It is our policy not to comment on pending litigation," said corrections spokeswoman January Smith.

In a press conference last week in Chicago, a former inmate and the attorney representing the prisoners made the case against mandatory soy diet, imposed as a cost-saving measure in 2003 by the Blagojevich administration.

Former inmate Thomas Salonis, 54, who is now living on the streets in Chicago and has served several sentences for burglary, described his problems with soy.

"In February of 2008, on my transfer to the Department of Corrections from the county jail, I immediately noticed a difference in the diet and my physical response to the diet. Immediately I started having excessive gas, irregular bowel movements and stomach bloating, and I had thought that my cancer was returning," he said.

Upon noticing the health changes, Salonis began to complain and write grievances, which he said were ignored for about nine months. After nearly passing out one day, he was hospitalized.

"Finally, I convinced the doctor to tell me what the problem was and he said 'You're allergic to all soy products,'" Salonis said. "He wrote me a prescription saying I was allergic to soy products, and don't serve me anything with soy. They still refused to give me a medical diet."

In spring 2008, the Weston Price Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based group that campaigns against soy, began receiving letters from inmates. Sally Fallon Morell, foundation president, took their interest to heart, and is funding the lawsuit.

"In 2003 all of a sudden there was 60 to 70 percent soy protein isolate in the various patties," Morell said. "It is not just the soy protein isolate going into the meat patties and the fake cheese, it is also going into the baked goods."

Meanwhile, the state has moved to dismiss the case, claiming that it cannot be sued in a federal court.

"That's just plain wrong," said Gary Cox, the attorney representing the inmates. "You can do that if they violated federal law, which we're arguing it is an Eighth Amendment violation of cruel and unusual punishment. And then a 14th Amendment violation, they're depriving these guys of their liberty by forcing them to eat soy, which is damaging their health."

He also said the prison system is retaliating against the plaintiffs, "by placing them in segregation, depriving them of some of their privileges, and refusing to let them make phone calls. They have even opened the mail between me and these guys."

Cox has filed an injunction against serving soy. In addition, he is suing for damages against the 34 other defendants, including wardens, health care unit supervisors, nurses and the physicians who work for the prisons' contractor.

"We are seeking damages for failure to provide adequate, necessary medical treatment, and also for retaliating against [two plaintiffs]," he explained.

Morell claimed that these men are getting in excess of 100 grams of soy protein a day, but one doctor remains skeptical.

"No, they are not getting 100 grams," said Dr. Christine Gerbstadt, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, who is also a registered dietitian. "Even if it is 70 percent [soy protein] in say a patty, they would be getting about 14 grams of soy protein in that portion. That means they would have to be getting over five portions a day, and it's hard to imagine they are serving five portions a day,"

Even if they were consuming 100 grams of soy protein a day, she said that amount would equal about three servings a day, which is not necessarily an unhealthy amount.

"Two servings a day is helpful and beneficial to heart health and is overall good for you," said Gerbstadt. "The Japanese diet is about seven-plus servings of soy a day, and they do not have any health complaints or problems."

In very excessive amounts, like 10 times the amount the inmates receive, Gerbstadt said soy could cause hormonal problems. She suggested the digestive problems the inmates are experiencing are most likely a food sensitivity that can be checked with simple blood work.

Yet, when Salonis gave his prescription outlining his soy allergies to the deputy director of the department of corrections, he said the deputy refused to help him.

If seeking an alternative diet, inmates are advised to buy food from the commissary. But commissary items are often expensive and few inmates have the money to support a diet at the commissary.

Even if they did, their diet would be far from ideal.

"The two most important foods for them to get at the commissary are sardines and spam," said Morell. "Spam is the only animal fat available to them in prison."

Salonis wants to even the score.

"I was punished for what I did wrong. I feel like the Department of Corrections, the administration, should be punished for what they're doing, and what they're still doing to people right now," he said.

## Related Links

[FDA statement on genetically engineered foods](#)[American Academy of Environmental Medicine on genetically modified foods](#)[Watch the press conference on YouTube](#)

## Illinois prisoners stimulate the debate on soy

Some Illinois inmates filed a suit against the soy diet they are served in prison, but the debate on soy originated outside prison walls. The argument is centered on the fact that most soy in America is genetically modified.

Genetically modified organisms are plants, animals, or bacteria, in which the genetic material, or DNA, has been altered in such a way that does not occur naturally, according to the World Health Organization. The genetic makeup of these organisms is altered using a special set of technologies.

"Genetically engineered soy now constitutes 90 percent of all soy growing in the United States," said Jeffrey Smith, executive director of the Institute for Responsible Technology, Fairfield, Iowa. The organization's purpose is to educate people about the health risks of genetically modified organisms.

Immune system problems, gastrointestinal problems, organ damage, deregulation of insulin, and accelerated aging have been linked to genetically modified feed in animal feeding studies, according to the American Academy of Environmental Medicine in Wichita, Kan. In May, the academy issued a statement calling on all doctors to prescribe a non-genetically modified diet to all patients.

Dr. Christine Gerbstadt, spokeswoman for Chicago-based American Dietetic Association, who is also a registered dietitian, agrees that much of the soy in America is genetically modified, but she does not see it as a health concern.

"Whether it's genetically modified or not the difference is in the agriculture part of it, and the health concerns at this point have not been thought to be a health issue," she said. "Soy as a protein extender is an economic and healthy way to achieve adequate protein intake."

But many disagree. "How could such dangerous genetically modified foods be approved in our society?" Smith asked during a press conference in Chicago last week.

"Well, it turns out it was industry manipulation, and political collusion," he said. He went on to claim that currently the Food and Drug Administration has no safety guidelines on genetically modified foods.

The FDA could not be reached for comment. But a check at the FDA Web site showed that the most recent statement available about genetically modified foods, in October 1999.

"Because FDA determined that bioengineered foods should be regulated like their conventional counterparts, FDA has not to date established any regulations specific to bioengineered food," according to the statement. "The policy also makes clear that labeling will be required if the composition of the genetically modified food differs significantly from what is expected for that food, or if the genetically modified food contains potential allergens."

Smith said the FDA has "abdicated its responsibility."

"I honestly know that cows and pigs avoid a genetically modified feed, when given a choice. So from the GM perspective it's our job to get humans up to the level of animals," said Smith.

Sally Fallon Morell, president of the Weston Price Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based group dedicated to restoring nutrient-dense foods to the human diet, suggested that the health problems involved with soy are extending beyond the prison system.

"The consequences are far more widespread than just the prison population," she said.