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Soy in Illinois prison diets prompts lawsuit over health effects

Group says plant protein causes problems for inmates

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Soy-enhanced chili mac, turkey patties with soy, soy-studded country gravy, soy-blend hot dogs, soy-spiked sloppy joes, Polish sausages packed with soy, soy chicken patties.

These aren't items from the latest vegetarian diet, but rather dishes served over a week at Danville Correctional Center, according to a recent menu.

They're also the basis of a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court this summer by nine plaintiffs who allege that the Illinois Department of Corrections is endangering the health of the inmates -- especially those with allergies, sensitivities and existing gastrointestinal and thyroid problems -- by serving them too much soy.



Tens of thousands of inmates in Illinois prisons are being fed "up to 100 grams" of soy protein a day, according to the Weston A. Price Foundation, which is funding the lawsuit. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends consuming about 25 grams of soy protein per day.

Based in Washington, D.C., the foundation promotes the consumption of whole, traditional and largely unprocessed foods. Foundation president Sally Fallon called the soy diet served in Illinois prisons "the Tuskegee of the 21st century," referring to the syphilis experiments performed on African-Americans from the 1930s to '70s.

"Never before have we had a large population like this being served such a high level of soy with almost no other choice," she said.

The plaintiffs are "suffering irreparable, actual harm by being forced to continue to eat food that has too much soy in it," according to an amended complaint filed in June.

The effects have ranged from acute allergic reactions and heart problems to gastrointestinal distress and thyroid dysfunction, it says.

Fallon said the foundation got involved after inmates from various Illinois facilities contacted her. Last month, the foundation hosted a local panel on the soy issue before its annual national conference in Schaumburg.

The plaintiffs are seeking an injunction that would stop the Department of Corrections from serving soy in Illinois prisons as well as damages from the prisons' contracted health care provider.

The department says it started serving soy-enhanced foods in March 2004 as a cost-cutting measure. But it declined to comment on most aspects of the pending litigation and is awaiting a ruling on its motion to dismiss the suit.

Nancy Chapman, executive director of the Soyfoods Association of North America, said she doubts prisoners are consuming as much soy as the foundation alleges.

"One hundred grams of any protein from plants or animals would not be economically feasible and would be an enormous load on the kidneys," Chapman said.

Prison menus indicate inmates are served as many as seven soy-enhanced "meat" entrees a week. But the foundation contends the inmates consume more soy through cooking oils and soy cheeses as well as baked products enhanced with soy protein concentrates.

Once the darling of the health-food community, soy -- especially non-fermented and genetically modified soy -- has fallen out of favor in some health circles. Last year the American Heart Association urged the FDA to stop recommending soy as a way to reduce heart disease risk, saying "direct cardiovascular benefits of soy protein or isoflavones are minimal at best."

Scientific studies have volleyed back and forth on whether high soy consumption reduces or increases cancer risk, inhibits mineral absorption and affects sperm concentrations.

But most agree that soy, especially unfermented varieties, can cause problems with the thyroid function and digestion.

Recommendations vary on how much soy is healthy to consume. The American Dietetic Association "believes that up to two servings of soy per day for adults could be part of a healthy diet," said spokeswoman Christine Gerbstadt. Examples of a serving include a half-cup of edamame, a cup of soy milk, a half-cup of tofu or a slice of bread in which soy flour is a component.

United Soybean Board consultant and researcher Mark Messina similarly recommends 15 to 20 grams of soy protein per day. Eating one soy burger (14 grams) and a cup of soy milk (7 grams) would exceed that level.

Thomas Salonis, a former inmate who is not a plaintiff in the lawsuit, said he nearly passed out in 2008 from gastrointestinal pain at the Hill Correctional Center in Galesburg.

He was diagnosed by a prison doctor as being allergic to soy -- one of the eight most common food allergies in the U.S., according to the FDA.

The doctor even wrote out a note, obtained by the Tribune, saying Salonis was allergic to soy. But the prison made no changes, according to Salonis. Finally, after a hunger strike, he was offered work that allowed him to buy instant soup from the commissary for his meals, he said.

The Department of Corrections says it accommodates medical diets but did not provide details as to how.

At the panel the Weston A. Price Foundation hosted in Rogers Park, Salonis spoke about suffering soy-induced stomach pain and bloating in prison.

"Gas was really an issue," said Salonis, who was released from prison last fall. "And most of my (cellmates) were real big, and they were like, 'Hey man you gotta take that somewhere else.' But I was like, 'Where am I gonna take it?' The whole thing was just offensive."

The legal complaint alleges that tests show all nine plaintiffs have hormone, lipid and enzyme levels consistent with thyroid damage caused by soy. Messina said soy intake is an issue only for those with pre-existing thyroid conditions and/or iodine deficiencies. All agree that people with soy allergies should not eat it.

The foundation says the Department of Corrections obtains most of its soy from Archer Daniels Midland through its contracts with Central Management Services, which oversees food procurement for the prisons. ADM said it has a contract to provide texturized vegetable protein and soy protein concentrates to the department, but neither party would disclose the amounts.

The foundation also contends prisons are serving genetically modified soy, which it says can further aggravate allergic reactions and mineral absorption.

Research by Monsanto, which developed herbicide-resistant soy, has found that the genetically modified product has up to 27 percent more of a potential allergen called trypsin inhibitor than other soy, said Jeffrey Smith, author of "Seeds of Deception," a book that criticizes genetically modified foods.

ADM said it cannot determine whether the soy products they supply to the Department of Corrections come from genetically modified beans.

The foundation has received nearly 200 letters about soy from prisoners in Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York and Florida, according to Fallon, who urges a return to older food-service models.

"Ten years ago many prisoners grew their own food," she said. "They raised their beef, their chicken, their vegetables and there was enough left over to sell it on the open market. ... We need to go back to that at prisons all over the country, teach them skills, get them outdoors in the sunlight with animals, eating real nutritious foods so they can truly be rehabilitated back into society."

When Fallon hears from families of soy-sensitive inmates, she urges them to send their incarcerated relatives money so they can purchase foods from the commissary.

"We recommend sardines, summer sausage and, of all things, SPAM," said Fallon, who usually advocates eating chemical-free meat from pastured animals. "They supply good protein, stable fats, vitamins A and D, and good minerals. They are in general very nutritious foods and provide just what they are missing in their prison diet."

Fallon said the foundation also is concerned about the growing use of soy in institutions serving children and the elderly.

"Illinois has a pilot program to bring this kind of diet to the schools, to growing children," she said.

Indeed, Chicago Public Schools menus incorporate soy-based texturized vegetable protein into their meat products and regularly serve doughnuts made with soy flour.

Despite the alleged suffering of inmates, Fallon says the diet in Illinois prisons presents an opportunity "to see what happens when you feed people soy with no other choices. This situation has brought it out into the open."

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