

Corn syrup producers want sweeter name: corn sugar



By EMILY FREDRIX, AP Marketing Writer
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NEW YORK – The makers of high fructose corn syrup want to sweeten its image with a new name: corn sugar. The Corn Refiners Association applied Tuesday to the federal government for permission to use the name on food labels. The group hopes a new name will ease confusion about the sweetener, which is used in soft drinks, bread, cereal and other products.

Americans' consumption of corn syrup has fallen to a 20-year low on consumer concerns that it is more harmful or more likely to cause obesity than ordinary sugar, perceptions for which there is little scientific evidence.

However, some scientists have linked consumption of full-calorie soda — the vast majority of which is sweetened with high fructose corn syrup — to obesity.

The Food and Drug Administration could take two years to decide on the name, but that's not stopping the industry from using the term now in advertising.

There's a new online marketing campaign at <http://www.cornsugar.com> and on television. Two new commercials try to alleviate shopper confusion, showing people who say they now understand that "whether it's corn sugar or cane sugar, your body can't tell the difference. Sugar is sugar."

Renaming products has succeeded before. For example, low erurcic acid rapeseed oil became much more popular after becoming "canola oil" in 1988. Prunes tried to shed a stodgy image by becoming "dried plums" in 2000.

The new name would help people understand the sweetener, said Audrae Erickson, president of the Washington-based group.

"It has been highly disparaged and highly misunderstood," she said. She declined to say how much the campaign costs.

Sugar and high fructose corn syrup are nutritionally the same, and there's no evidence that the sweetener is any worse for the body than sugar, said Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. The bottom line is people should consume less of all sugars, Jacobson said.

"Soda pop sweetened with sugar is every bit as conducive to obesity as soda pop sweetened with

high fructose corn syrup," he said.

The American Medical Association says there's not enough evidence yet to restrict the use of high fructose corn syrup, although it wants more research.

Still, Americans increasingly are blaming high fructose corn syrup and avoiding it. First lady Michelle Obama has said she does not want her daughters eating it.

Parents such as Joan Leib scan ingredient labels and will not buy anything with it. The mother of two in Somerville, Mass., has been avoiding the sweetener for about a year to reduce sweeteners in her family's diet.

"I found it in things that you would never think needed it, or should have it," said Leib, 36. "I found it in jars of pickles, in English muffins and bread. Why do we need extra sweeteners?"

Many companies are responding by removing it from their products. Last month, Sara Lee switched to sugar in two of its breads. Gatorade, Snapple and Hunt's Ketchup very publicly switched to sugar in the past two years.

The average American ate 35.7 pounds of high fructose corn syrup last year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That's down 21 percent from 45.4 pounds 10 years before.

Cane and beet sugar, meanwhile, have hovered around 44 pounds per person per year since the mid-1980s, after falling rapidly in the 1970s, when high fructose corn syrup — a cheaper alternative to sugar — gained favor with soft drink makers.

With sales falling in the U.S., the industry is growing in emerging markets like Mexico, and revenue has been steady at \$3 billion to \$4 billion a year, said Credit Suisse senior analyst Robert Moskow. There are five manufacturers in the U.S.: Archer Daniels Midland Inc., Corn Products International, Cargill, Roquette America, and Tate & Lyle.

Corn refiners say their new name better describes the sweetener.

"The name 'corn sugar' more accurately reflects the source of the food (corn), identifies the basic nature of the food (a sugar), and discloses the food's function (a sweetener)," the petition said.

Will shoppers swallow the new name?

The public is skeptical, so the move will be met with criticism, said Tim Calkins, a marketing professor at Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

"This isn't all that much different from any of the negative brands trying to embrace new brand names," he said, adding the change is similar to what ValuJet — whose name was tarnished by a deadly crash in 1996 — did when it bought AirTran's fleet and took on its name.

"They're not saying this is a healthy vitamin, or health product," he said. "They're just trying to move

away from the negative associations."

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