

Dunkin' Donuts to remove titanium dioxide from donuts

The baked goods giant says it will remove whitening agent from its powdered donuts over fears it might contain toxic nanomaterials

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Dunkin' Donuts announced Tuesday it is removing titanium dioxide, a whitening agent, from its powdered donuts. The move comes after As You Sow, an organization promoting corporate accountability, pressured the fast food chain to remove the chemical over concerns that it might be a toxic nanomaterial. The science on the toxicity of nanomaterials remains inconclusive.

“The ingredient used in our powdered donuts does not meet the definition of ‘nanomaterial’ as outlined under FDA guidance,” says Karen Raskopf, chief communications officer for Dunkin' Brands. “Nevertheless, we began testing alternative formulations for this product in 2014 and we are in the process of rolling out a solution to the system that does not contain titanium dioxide. Rather than adding a new ingredient, we have reformulated it in order to remove titanium dioxide.”



Last year, As You Sow filed a shareholder resolution asking Dunkin' Brands, the parent company of Dunkin' Donuts, to identify products that may contain nanomaterials, and to assess the risks of using these substances in foods. The company was using food-grade titanium dioxide on its powdered sugar products, and maintained that it included no nanoparticles. However, an independent test commissioned by As You Sow found otherwise.

“Most likely, food manufacturers don’t know that there are nano components in these items,” says Todd Kuiken, of the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies (PEN). “I can’t imagine Dunkin’ Donuts went to their manufacturers and requested nano-sized titanium dioxide to put in their sugar.

“The reality is that food companies are buying this stuff from a manufacturer that sells food-grade titanium dioxide, but most likely it has not been engineered at the nanoscale.”

Titanium dioxide is in almost every white consumer product, including sunscreen, toothpaste, powdered sugar and various sweets. Food manufacturers use food-grade titanium dioxide to make white items appear brighter, but in 2012, researchers at Arizona State University found that much of the food-grade titanium dioxide on the market includes nanoparticles.

While titanium dioxide has been deemed safe for human consumption, the safety of nano titanium dioxide has not been studied, and activists are concerned that nanoparticles are now essentially being tested on the American public.

There are no labeling requirements for nanoparticles in the US, so consumers who are concerned about the health impacts of nanoparticles also can’t avoid them. In the EU, nanoparticles must be listed on labels for consumer products such as sunscreen and toothpaste. The EU last year passed similar labeling requirements for food products, which are currently being defined. Activist groups are now putting pressure on US manufacturers to either remove the ingredients from food, or begin labelling them.

“This is a groundbreaking decision. Dunkin’ has demonstrated strong industry leadership by removing this ingredient from its products,” says Danielle Fugere, president and chief counsel for As You Sow.

“Engineered nanomaterials are beginning to enter the food supply, despite not being proven safe for consumption. Dunkin’ has made a decision to protect its customers and its bottom line by avoiding use of an unproven and potentially harmful ingredient.”

According to Kuiken, the state of the current research on titanium dioxide in food is inconclusive. The ASU study found nano components in food-grade titanium dioxide, and then made something of a logical leap to say that some 89 products had nano-titanium dioxide in them without actually testing each product individually.

It’s possible that not all food-grade titanium dioxide on the market includes nano components. The lack of testing has led to misinformation, first in the form of a Friends of the Earth report, and then a Mother Jones article that repeated the findings of the report.

Friends of the Earth alleged a tenfold increase in foods incorporating nanoparticles on the market, based on the sudden increase of items in PEN’s Consumer Product Inventory. That inventory, according to Kuiken, has been updated recently with items from the ASU report, which the site has linked to and labeled as a “category 5 resource”. Kuiken says that category is “our lowest level of confidence in the information”.

As You Sow produced a report based on the ASU findings shortly after the Friends of the Earth report came out. “They did a better job,” Kuiken says. “They said, ‘look, there’s titanium dioxide in these food products that could contain nano-components’.”

Researchers have found that children have the highest concentrations of titanium dioxide and that it persists in the environment. “Although several of these product classes contained low amounts of titanium, their widespread use and disposal down the drain and eventually to wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) deserves attention,” the ASU report said.

Despite some confusion about how many food products actually contain nano particles, many agree that more research is needed on the health impacts of nano-titanium dioxide, and that consumers have a right to know what’s in their food.

The US Consumer Product Safety Commission, in its budget request to Congress in February, requested an additional \$5m to establish the Center for Consumer Product Applications and Safety Implications of Nanotechnology, the stated aim of which would be to “ identify nanomaterials in consumer products and to understand human exposures to those materials”.

Yesterday’s announcement only affects Dunkin’ Donuts products in the US. The company’s powdered donuts in the UK do not include this ingredient.

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