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The Truth About Red Dye No. 2

BY [LUKE YOQUINTO](#) PUBLISHED MAY 30, 2013 IN [NEWS](#)

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If you live in Canada or Europe, there's a good chance you've consumed amaranth, the crimson food dye also known as Red No. 2. But you won't find Red No. 2 in foods in the U.S.: It's illegal here.

Red No. 2 was one of the first food dyes to be declared legal when the U.S. government began to regulate such things in 1906. A cheap, tasteless substance, only a very small amount of the dye was necessary to lend flaming color to foods and makeup, and until the 1970s, it could be found in a number of comestibles and cosmetics.

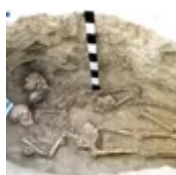
In 1971, however, Soviet scientists announced that Red No. 2 caused cancer. Public outcry in the U.S. against the dye quickly gained such fervor that the Mars candy company temporarily stopped producing red M&Ms despite the fact that they had never contained Red No. 2 in the first place.

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In 1976, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) concluded that, in high doses, Red No. 2 could cause cancer in female rats. The FDA declared it an ingredient non grata in the United States because although it had never been shown to pose health risks to humans, no one had been able to prove it safe, either.

Elsewhere, Red No. 2 remains legal, and was declared harmless most recently by the European Food Safety Authority in 2010. In the U.S., the food industry could petition for the dye's re-legalization, if it can be proven safe in animals. However, such testing would be expensive, so it's unlikely to be done because Red No. 2's successor, Red No. 40, is legal and readily available in the United States and Canada.

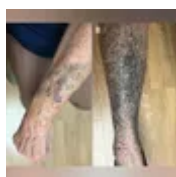
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But in a twist of fate, the European Food Safety Authority recently recommended limiting children's intake of Red No. 40. As a result, while Red No. 2 is illegal in the U.S. but flows freely in the EU, the near-opposite is true for Red No. 40.

Food Facts explores the weird world of the chemicals and nutrients found in our food, and appears on MyHealthNewsDaily on Fridays.

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Source: Food and Nutritional Toxicology (CRC press, 2004).

Luke Yoquinto MyHealthNewsDaily Correspondent

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