Olean—Out of the Frying Pan

It’s official. More consumers have lodged complaints against the fake fat olestra (Olean) than against any other food additive in history.

Olean’s manufacturer, consumer-products giant Procter & Gamble, has received more than 13,000 adverse reaction reports on its toll-free hotline since the spring of 1996, when Frito-Lay started test-marketing olestra-containing Max chips.

Add that to the 2,000 reports phoned in to CSPI’s Olestra Hotline (888-OLESTRA) or reported to www.cspinet.org/olestraform and you’ve got one scary substance. (CSPI—the Center for Science in the Public Interest—is the non-profit consumer advocacy group that publishes Nutrition Action Healthletter.)

Complaints ranged from mild stomach upset to cramps so severe that, in scores of cases, the victims needed to be hospitalized.

In addition to causing gastrointestinal distress, Olean robs the body of carotenoids, which are substances found in fruits and vegetables that may protect against cancer, heart disease, and macular degeneration—the leading cause of blindness in the elderly.

Last October, in response to a CSPI complaint, the National Advertising Division (NAD) of the Council of Better Business Bureaus ruled that P&G ads were inaccurate when they portrayed Olean as a natural product that looks like vegetable oil. In fact, Olean is synthetic and has a consistency similar to that of mayonnaise or soft margarine.

What can you do to stop Olean from spreading throughout the food supply? Don’t buy Wow chips and other snack foods made from it. That’s the strongest message you can send...and apparently the only one that matters to P&G.

Michael F. Jacobson, Executive Director Center for Science in the Public Interest