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German Christmas Cookies Pose Health Danger

by EMILY HARRIS

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Morning Edition

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One of Germany's most popular Christmas cookies -- Cinnamon Stars -- are loaded with coumarin, a chemical that naturally occurs in cinnamon but which at high levels can damage the liver.

[Transcript](#)

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RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

You hear the warnings every year. Holiday food can be deadly. For example, raw eggs and eggnog - never mind the nog. In Germany, a traditional Christmas cookie is now illegal because it contains a lot of coumarin, a chemical that occurs naturally in cinnamon. Too much coumarin can be bad for your liver. The German cookies are still for sale and a consumer group is making them the stars of a debate over the power of lobbyists.

Here's NPR's Emily Harris.

EMILY HARRIS: The case of the illegal Christmas cookies started last holiday season when a scientist in a government food safety lab smelled something strange during a test, something bitter and strong. Head of the lab, Axel Proust(ph), says it turned out to be coumarin at levels up to 40 times what's allowed here in food.

Mr. AXEL PROUST (Scientist): This is such an exceptional result. And it's close, not real, but close to a toxic effect on humans that we had to tell it to the government.

HARRIS: And that started a long back and forth between German officials and the cookie industry to decide what to do. The most wanted cookie is the cinnamon star, small and glazed, sold through the fall and the holiday season.

(Soundbite of conveyor belt)

HARRIS: Tasty treats dropped off a conveyor belt at Lamberg, a 300-year-old cookie factory. Head of supply chain management Hannus Vicharecht(ph) says no one has ever picked on the little cinnamon star before.

Mr. HANNUS VICHARECHT (Supply Chain Manager): Everybody, not only we, everybody in the whole industry thought that the regulation does not apply to the cinnamon stars because we do not put flavor in the product, but we put natural cinnamon into the product.

HARRIS: Months after the initial alert, the German government decided the rule does apply to cinnamon stars and other deserts and cereals. But by then, most all the Christmas cookies mass-produced for this holiday season were snug in their bags on their way to store shelves. After conference calls and consultations, officials decided to let those cookies be sold, but warned the public not to eat too many or too much of anything cinnamon.

(Soundbite of music)

HARRIS: At a Christmas market in Berlin, Gutta Arholt(ph) has heard that a lot of cinnamon, if it contains coumarin, could be dangerous. But she's happily sipping hot wine, traditionally seasoned with cinnamon.

MS. GUTTA ARHOLT (Marketing): (Speaking German)

HARRIS: You've got to have mold wine at Christmas market, she says.

German officials say they let the cookies stay on shelves and the mold wine flow in part because the European Union is expected to end coumarin limits. New research shows people normally just don't eat enough to be dangerous. Until that law changes - well, after this year's Christmas cookies are sold - coumarin in German food is supposed to drop to current legal levels. But Barbara Hohl, with the consumer group Foodwatch, says this holiday season the government dealt with a potential health problem by pandering to the cookie industry.

Ms. BARBARA HOHL (Foodwatch): For Foodwatch, the main scandal is these political lobbying, that we do have a law and that the government is tolerating the lawbreaking by the industry. I mean it's not very democratic, basically.

HARRIS: Letters obtained by Foodwatch showed the industry considered the discovery of high coumarin levels a crisis, especially when a possible recall seems likely to crumble sales. Off tape, officials admit that their solution for this season doesn't follow the letter of the law. Still, one argues that letting the cookies be sold and advising people not to gorge does preserve the spirit of the law and the flavor of Christmas.

Emily Harris, NPR News, Berlin.

The German Gov
recommends no
more than
1 Tablespoon a day