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Soft Drinks Pulled from Shelves Over Cancer Fear

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Soft Drinks were being removed from supermarket shelves last night after they were found to be contaminated with a cancer-causing chemical.

Four products were immediately pulled from shelves and a further 22, including leading brands, were found to contain levels of benzene greater than that allowed in tap water. The bottles already taken from shelves because they breach World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance include own-label soft drinks sold by the Co-op, Morrisons and Aldi.

Tests on one Co-op drink showed that levels of benzene, which is linked with leukaemia and other forms of blood cancer, were 36 times those allowed in tap water. Drinks that were still on sale last night, but that breach the legal limit for benzene in tap water, include some of those made by Schweppes, Robinsons, Kia-Ora, Vimto and Lilt.

Food safety campaigners demanded that all products with benzene levels above drinking water be removed from sale until they complied with the tap water standard.

Richard Watts, spokesman for Sustain, said: "I would think twice about drinking anything that was above the standard for drinking water, and many parents will feel the same. It is outrageous that it has taken so long for the public to learn these figures, given the industry has known about the problem for 15 years. Yet only now consumers will know the truth."

Stephen O'Brien, Conservative health spokesman, said: "These are very important results, but they reinforce the need for us to know what is a safe limit for benzene to be acceptable in drinks, and I feel the agency must now decide what is that safe limit."

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) said last night that it wanted urgent talks with the soft drinks industry to ensure that all products meet the legal level for tap water of one part per billion. There is no maximum level for the chemical in soft drinks in EU law and there is no

legal requirement even for manufacturers to follow the WHO limit. The bottles removed from sale are:

- * Two batches of the Co-op's litre bottle of low-calorie bitter lemon, with 28ppb and 11ppb benzene;
- * Morrisons' two-litre no added sugar pineapple and grapefruit crush, with 11ppb;
- * Aldi's Hyberry one-litre high-juice, no added sugar blackcurrant squash, 12ppb;
- * A Popstar 330ml still, sugar-free lemon and lime drink, with 17ppb benzene, manufactured by Silver Spring Mineral Water, of Folkestone, Kent.

There was anger that the FSA and the drinks industry had been slow to investigate benzene in soft drinks. Action was only triggered after traces of benzene were found in the US in brands such as Diet Pepsi and Sunny D — these drinks have different formulations in Britain and do not contain benzene.

The FSA rushed out results yesterday of tests on 149 drinks including a range of fruit juice, iced tea, squash, fizzy and low-sugar drinks. It did not check any brand of cola because this does not contain the two products that trigger the formation of benzene in drinks, an agency spokesman said.

The compound has only been found where drinks contain sodium benzoate E211, a preservative used widely by manufacturers to prevent growth of moulds, and ascorbic acid E300, otherwise known as vitamin C. An absence of sugar from a drink and exposure to light and heat are also possible causes.

The bulk of the drinks, including Fanta and own-brand juices from Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose showed no detectable traces of benzene or matched the UK water standard of 1ppb, prompting the food watchdog to demand that all drinks comply with the standard.

Andrew Wadge, the FSA director of food safety, said: "These results show that it is technologically possible to produce soft drinks without detectable traces of benzene. This is what we want all manufacturers to do."

He made clear that people should not be alarmed if they have drunk the products. Benzene is in the air and most people on average breathe in 220 micrograms a day.

People would need to consume more than 20 litres of a drink containing benzene at 10ppb to equal the daily amount from the air.

The British Soft Drinks Association said last night in a statement: "The test results published by the FSA show that the levels of benzene that have been found are very low and that soft drinks are safe to drink."

The Co-op and Aldi immediately removed the contaminated drinks from sale and Morrisons issued a recall.

The Silver Spring Mineral Company, which manufactures the other brand removed from sale, declined to comment.

History and Origin of Benzene in Soft Drinks
<http://www.schoolpouringrights.com>