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HEALTH

CELEBRITY PLUS NEWS FOR DIETERS—

OLESTRA

a calorie-free fat for snackers

Having your cake *and* eating it too? Until now, that concept has been strictly a fantasy for dieters and overeaters alike, but if Procter & Gamble gets its way, once very fattening dreams really will come true. From the same people who brought us innovations like fluoride toothpaste, bath soap that floats and synthetic detergents, comes a new product already being hailed by investors as "the single most important development in the history of the food industry."

P&G has been developing a product called Olestra ever since it was accidentally discovered in the early sixties. A little less than a year ago the company turned more than 10 thousand pages of research and scientific data over to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration seeking approval of Olestra—its own form of something known as sucrose polyester, a fat substitute which may eventually replace conventional oils and fats.

Despite its artificial sound, sucrose polyester (SPE) is actually a combination of ordinary oils and sugar put together in a unique and patented way not found in nature, or the foods we eat so that it is not digested by the enzymes in the body that would normally digest high calorie fat.

"Olestra," says Procter & Gamble spokesman Don Tassone, "is a calorie-free, dietary fat replacement that has the same taste, texture and cooking properties that ordinary fat (cooking oils) would, but has no calories

because it is not absorbed or digested by the body."

What that all means is that if the product receives FDA approval, in about a year as predicted by industry analysts, shortenings and oils used for home cooking, oils that fast food chains use for deep frying and baked goods, and salted snacks like potato and corn chips will be made with Olestra—and we will all be the thinner for it. Other companies like General Foods and PepsiCo's Frito-Lay aren't far behind in developing their own SPE versions, realizing the importance of the Cincinnati-based P&G discovery.

Although there are other sucrose polyesters already approved by the FDA, none are as yet used as food additives. P&G stumbled upon Olestra accidentally when their scientists attempted to develop a type of fat for people who have trouble digesting fat but need it in their diets, like premature babies, for example. What they found was a fat that isn't digested at all—and is perhaps the discovery of the century.

But what exactly does that mean in human terms? "Here's a way for people to eat the same order of french fries that they would normally eat and consume significantly fewer calories and significantly less fat," says Tassone. "An order of french fries prepared at a fast food chain today contains about 220 calories and about nine grams of fat. That same order, cooked with oil containing 75% Olestra, would con-

tain 150 calories and *only* two grams of fat."

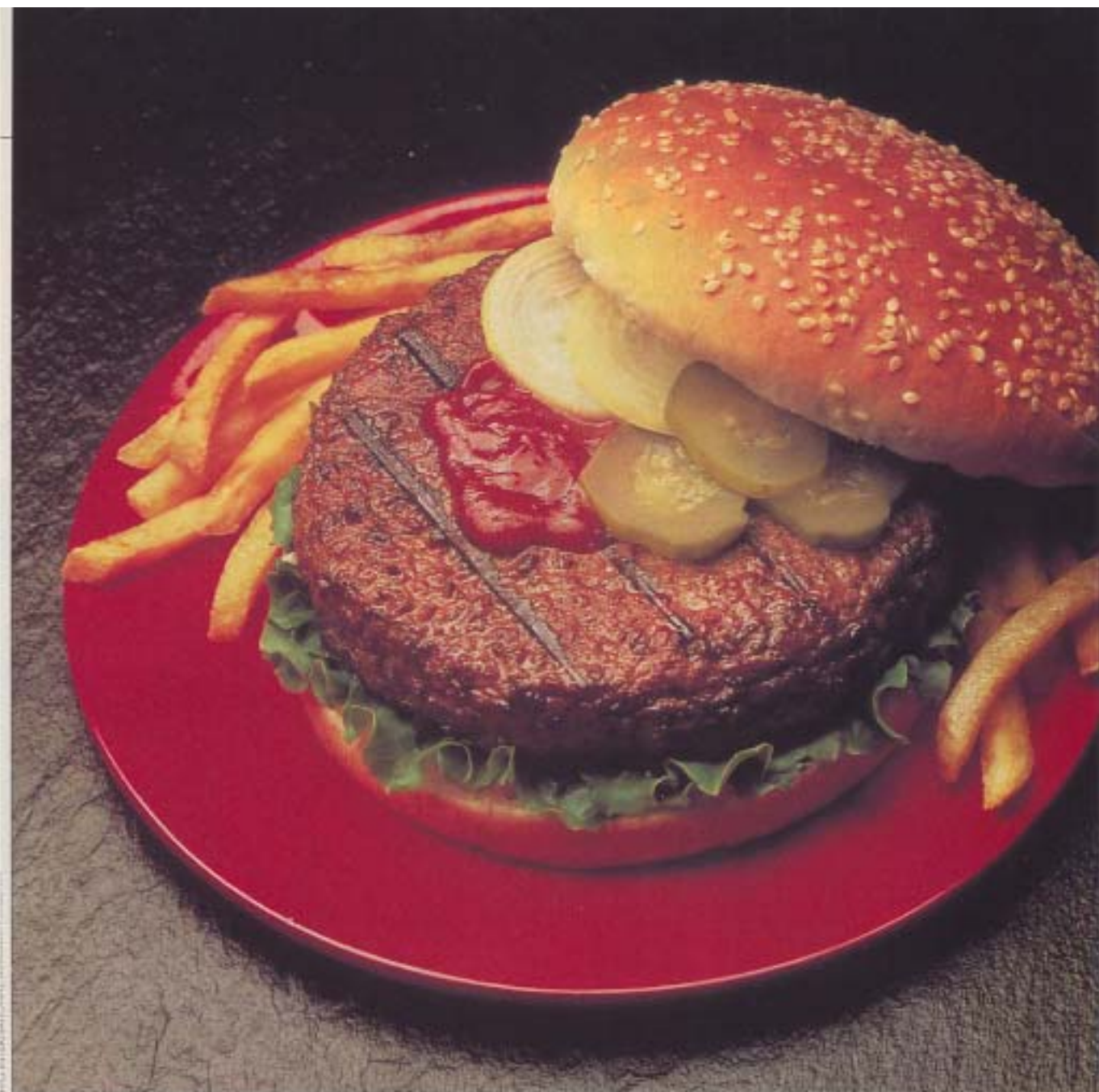
Research also suggests that SPE may actually reduce cholesterol, because it carries some of it out of the body before it can be digested. At the same time, it seems to increase levels of certain "good" cholesterol (high-density lipoproteins) which scientists believe help protect against heart attacks.

Most important for the average consumer to note is that a product cooked in Olestra will taste the same as if it had been cooked in conventional fat and will give the same feeling of fullness, which is important to satiate our appetites and make us feel as though we haven't "denied" ourselves.

SPE was tested at the University of Cincinnati with attention to the needs of obese people. When ten subjects took controlled amounts of SPE in their diets for 20 days, the average participant lost eight pounds and did not crave extra calories. In other tests, even people who felt bloated after meals lost weight.

If all this seems too good to be true, SPE and Olestra are not without their problems. Although P&G says their product has been tested for the general population, they do admit that there have been side effects.

Early experiments showed that the product had a laxative effect on some people—a problem they claim to have remedied by changing the composition of Olestra by making it "firmer." The other problem they found is that Olestra has an effect on the body's



absorption of Vitamin E. They plan to supplement the product with the vitamin so that food cooked with Olestra will be nutritionally equivalent to foods cooked without it. "Other than those problems, we haven't found any side effects," the company spokesman explains. "We've tested it on a number of diabetics, for whom there's an obvious benefit, with no ill effects."

Still, some nutritionists and skeptics feel that many currently diet-conscious people will quickly turn to foods cooked with SPE in place of natural foods with important nutrients and vitamins. There's also no guarantee that long-term side effects may not develop later on.

Others like Carla Croce, a clin-

ical dietician at the Eating Disorders Unit of the Washington (D.C.) Hospital Center, believe SPE may have serious ramifications for those suffering from anorexia and bulimia. "This product won't help them," she says. "As far as an anorexic is concerned, SPE might be attractive to them because it doesn't have calories. What will probably happen is that they will avoid naturally occurring fats, and they especially need fat and calories. I think it also has some psychological implications."

Despite those fears, Wall Street is licking its lips in anticipation of Olestra's projected approval. Within a few days of filing with the FDA, Procter & Gamble's shares on the market jumped 10%

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to 93%.

The company has also filed for approval in England, and some analysts say the market for SPE-based foods could very easily exceed a billion dollars.

The NutraSweet Company also announced it had developed a low-calorie cholesterol-free substitute for fat called Simplese, derived from proteins in natural foods like milk and egg whites. NutraSweet said it would be on the market within 18 months with food products containing Simplese including ice creams, salad dressings, mayonnaise, yogurt, and butter and cheese spreads, but can not be used for cooking.

As for french fries, Olestra still leads the field; Simplese, it seems, just can't take the heat. ☆