

ENVIRONMENTAL & REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Breast Cancer, Yoplait and You – Making Changes to Protect Our Health

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Breast cancer is a disease that touches all of us. African American women know that the disease is often more deadly for them, and that the rates of breast cancer are rising among their sisters in other communities of color.

A great deal of money is raised in the name of breast cancer by companies that put pink ribbons on their products. Doing this boosts sales for the company and raises money for activities like breast cancer research. It's called "cause-marketing," because it involves tying a marketed product to a cause that is important to people who purchase items.

Breast cancer is the focus of much product marketing because so many people care about breast cancer, and because the people most directly affected by breast cancer are women who also make the purchasing decisions for their families.

Sometimes these product sales do more for the company selling the products than they do for women who have or who might get breast cancer. Because there are no rules about who can use pink ribbons on products, some companies use them to sell products without giving much or anything to the breast cancer cause. As cause marketing for breast cancer grew, so did the scams.

(BCA), a national education and advocacy organization based in San Francisco, California, is the leading breast cancer watchdog organization in the U.S. To try to help people sort through the masses of pink ribbon products, and to urge the companies using them to be more accountable and transparent, BCA launched its "Think Before You Pink (TB4UP)" campaign in 2002. Every October – during Breast Cancer Awareness Month – we urge people to ask questions about how money is raised for breast cancer through product marketing.

As a result of TB4UP, many more companies are now being more responsible about how they market their breast cancer-related products, providing information about how much goes to the cause, what the money raised is used for, and how much of a difference your purchase makes.

But there are some products that are particularly troubling no matter how much money they raise. These products are made by companies that participate in breast cancer fundraising or "awareness" campaigns but manufacture and sell items linked to the disease. BCA uses the term "pinkwashing" to describe these products. With the growing concern over toxic exposures in everyday life, BCA believes that corporations, especially those claiming to care about breast cancer, have an obligation to make safer products.

Yoplait Yogurt, made by General Mills Corporation, is one of these products. You've probably seen those Yoplait containers with pink lids on them that say "Save Lids to Save Lives" either in a story in your neighborhood or at a conference or meeting where breakfast was served. The yogurt is very popular, and it seems like an easy way to eat good food and support advances in breast cancer.

To make a donation to the cause, consumers send in the Yoplait yogurt lids for a donation of 10 cents per lid. (To make a contribution of \$36, a person would need to eat three yogurts a day during the four months the campaign runs each year. That's a lot of yogurt!)

What was particularly troubling about this was that, up until now the yogurt itself might not have been that good for our health—particularly where breast cancer is concerned. Breast cancer is largely a hormonally-driven disease. The more exposure women have to hormones, the greater their breast cancer risk. Yet Yoplait yogurt for years has been made with milk from cows treated with an artificial growth hormone called recombinant bovine growth hormone, or rBGH (also referred to as rBST), which is injected into cows so they will produce more milk.

Made by Monsanto (until the business was sold

to the drug company Eli Lilly in the fall of 2008), rBGH was approved by the FDA in 1993 on the basis of one study, despite opposition from many physicians, scientists, and consumer advocacy groups. Since then, it made its way into the nation's dairy products without any labeling, including Yoplait. Dairy companies who have pledged not to use rBGH put a label on their products indicating that they are rBGH-free (although companies' right to label their products this way is currently coming under attack). rBGH is banned in the European Union, Canada, Australia, and Japan.

There are a number of organizations working to stop the use of rBGH in American dairy cows, and to stop companies using dairy from cows that have been given rBGH. General Mills, which makes Yoplait, had been approached changing how they make, but said they that they couldn't make their Yoplait without rBGH-based dairy.

Since many other companies – including Starbucks and Wal-Mart – were making the transition to rBGH-free dairy, BCA knew that General Mills could do it to. And BCA knew that the company would do it if they heard from enough consumers – people just like you – that it mattered to them.

In the summer of 2008, BCA wrote to General Mills, asking for a meeting with the Chief Executive Officer and other appropriate officials to discuss our concerns. We focused on General Mills not just because they were marketing their yogurt with the breast cancer connection, but also because General Mills is an industry leader. We believed that if General Mills changed, other smaller companies would follow their lead.

The company refused to meet with us, or to discuss our concerns seriously with us. So, in October, 2008, BCA launched its Think Before You Pink Campaign with an e-mail asking folks to contact the head of General Mills to stop using dairy stimulated with rBGH. The head of the company got thousands of messages urging that, as a company that has made such a public commitment to ending breast cancer, General Mills should join other businesses and stop using milk from cows treated with rBGH.

At the TB4UP website, we let people know how to tell General Mills to "put a lid" on rBGH in Yoplait.

In addition, we printed postcards that people could simply sign and send off to the head of General Mills. We asked other organizations that care about the issue of hormones in food to pass on the message, and many of them did. General Mills received thousands of e-mails and post cards from people just like you.

While General Mills responded to all those messages, telling folks that they believed there is no evidence that rBGH posed a health problem, they were working to make the change that consumers were demanding.

On February 9, 2009, General Mills announced that, by August of this year, their Yoplait will be made exclusively with dairy products from cows that haven't been given rBGH. The announcement was a thrilling testament to the power of consumers to make their voices heard by one of the largest corporations in the world.

Two weeks later, Dannon, a company that, with General Mills represents 2/3rds of the dairy market in the U.S., announced that it would follow General Mills' lead and also go rBGH-free.

So, by September, when you buy Yoplait or attend a conference where Yoplait is being served, you can be confident that the yogurt will be free of any dairy that's been stimulated with rBGH.

The world is becoming a better place because people just like you want it to be a better place.

To find out how you can get involved with activism to change the course of the breast cancer epidemic, visit www.bcaction.org or call, toll free 877-278-6722.

