

Letters to the Editor

Tahitian Noni® juice is not hepatotoxic

Palabras clave: Hepatotxicidad. Noni.

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Dear Editor:

The recent case report from Spain of hepatitis associated with an herbal preparation of Noni (1) could have provided some valuable information relative to the applicability of the European assessment of Noni juice to unapproved Noni based products. However, there were two major shortcomings in the report. The first appears to be a potentially incomplete diagnosis in the viral tests. No serological test for hepatitis E is mentioned in the report. Hepatitis E is known to occur in Ecuador, and previously reported to have been brought to Spain from Ecuador (2). Viral hepatitis, including E, is endemic to Ecuador. Therefore, it seems that not all of the most plausible causes of the illness were accounted for. So, it initially appears that a very important part of the diagnosis may have been left out. A recent study in the Netherlands of three patients with acute hepatitis E, but no history of travel to endemic countries, suggests that the diagnosis of hepatitis E should be considered in cases of unexplained acute hepatitis, even in the absence of foreign travel (3). The incubation period for hepatitis E is approximately 2 to 9 weeks –this is within the time of the Ecuador trip– and resolves within a few weeks–which also appears to coincide with the time frame described in this case report.

The second shortcoming is the lack of detail in the actual identity of the product obtained from an herbal market in Ecuador and consumed by the patient. It is important to know if the product was a commercial or home made preparation, and which parts of the plant were used, as well as the inclusion of any other ingredients, or adulterated with undeclared ingredients? Did the product undergo any sanitation processing, etc.?

Even though reported to have been Noni, did the product even contain Noni? Our laboratories have analyzed many commercial, as well as several home made, Noni preparations. We have observed and reported a wide variety in quality and content in products that are marketed in various places around the world as Noni. Therefore, not all products promoted as Noni can be expected to be of equal quality and safety (4). Herein should be emphasized that the safety assessment of Noni fruit juice has been based almost entirely on one commercial source from French Polynesia (Tahitian Noni® Juice), with one manufacturing and quality control process. Therefore, the herbal preparation from Ecuador may not be accounted for in the previous safety assessment and toxicological studies, since these important identity and quality factors are unknown (5).

Noni juice products of known identity and which have received formal approval, at least within the European Union and more particularly Tahitian Noni® Juice, have been determined to be safe for human consumption, and are not likely to cause any adverse liver effects. The possible association between Noni juice and hepatotoxicity has been investigated by Panel on Dietetic Products, Nutrition and Allergies of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) during 2006. EFSA concluded that a link between Noni juice and the cases of hepatitis could not be found, and the juice is not likely to induce adverse human liver effects (6).

The EFSA opinion applies only to Noni fruit juice products produced in accordance with certain quality parameters, and which have been properly evaluated by authorities for substantial equivalence to the original Noni juice product upon which EU approval had been based. As it is known that many products which are promoted as Noni are, in fact, quite different than the approved juice, more information could have been helpful to understanding the potential risks of unapproved Noni products and manufacturers.

B. J. West and L. F. Berrio

*Research and Development Department.
Tahitian Noni International. Utah, USA*

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