

So Roundup “probably” causes cancer. This means what, exactly?

The World Health Organization just classified glyphosate — the active ingredient in the herbicide Roundup — as a probable carcinogen.

Don’t forget that the list of things that probably cause cancer includes ... just about everything. Sunshine, alcoholic beverages (the ethanol therein), wood dust, and outdoor pollution are “known” carcinogens. The “probable” group includes wood smoke, night shifts (they disrupt circadian rhythms), and hot mate (the South American drink).

I make these comparisons not to downplay the risk — just to put it in proper context. Just about everything in life has risks; the trick is to weigh those risks thoughtfully against benefits.

It may be that we as a society decide that, if the carcinogenic risk of this herbicide is greater than its benefits, we should take steps to reduce it. We’d want to do this in a holistic way, looking carefully at farm practice to ensure that glyphosate isn’t replaced with something worse. And we shouldn’t let the fact that it’s associated with the GMO boogeyman cloud our thinking.

Another probable carcinogen, [acrylamide](#), is formed by cooking at high temperatures: It shows up, for instance, in coffee beans, potato chips, and french fries. The [FDA just approved](#) a GMO potato that produces less than half the acrylamide. If we want to reduce glyphosate use, shouldn’t we also embrace this potato? And conversely, if we aren’t worried about glyphosate, is there really any need for the new potatoes?

Either way, let’s just be consistent.

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