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Consumer Corner:

Is a microwave oven dangerous?

I am very interested in buying an electronic oven but I would like some information concerning the effect of this new method of cooking on our health. Is this oven dangerous in any way? Please comment.

There is no question but that microwaves can be injurious, according to the Food and Drug Administration's Bureau of Radiological Health. "It is known that microwaves can interfere with the body's metabolism. Microwave exposure also can cause skin burns and may affect eyes and other organs. For example, cataracts have been associated with exposure to microwaves. The degree of physical harm that may be produced depends on the region of the body exposed and on the intensity of the radiation, the duration of exposure and the frequency of the radiation."

However the bureau has set standards to assure the consumer that microwave ovens will pose no radiation hazard and as far as the bureau is concerned there is no reason why a consumer should not purchase a microwave oven if it suits his or her household.

Thousands of the ovens are used in homes, institutions and commercial establishments today. At the end of 1970 approximately 150,000 microwave cooking ovens were estimated to be in use in the United States. And some industry representatives estimate that by 1976, 25 per cent of all cooking ovens bought in this country will be microwave ovens.

Present FDA standards should provide assurance to consumers that today's microwave ovens are safe. Nevertheless, consumers should carefully inspect design features before purchasing an oven.

To insure long-term, safe operation, the FDA suggests that the oven is received in good condition and that it contains at least the following features:

- A door seal that is easy to keep clean.
 - Two independent safety switches.
 - A door through which no small objects can be inserted.
- Even more important is the need for proper care after purchase.
- Here are some general recommendations for proper care of such ovens.
- Follow the owner's manual.
 - Clean the interior, door and door seals regularly.
 - Have the oven serviced regularly by an authorized serviceman.
 - Never use metal cooking containers. Use only paper, earthenware, or glass cookware.
 - Never operate an empty oven.
 - Never attempt to adjust the safety switches.
 - When using ovens manufactured before October 1971, stay at least an arm's length away from the door.

FDA continues to maintain surveillance of these products, to review manufacturers' quality control programs, to visit manufacturers' facilities to see that they meet specifications, and to laboratory test ovens to see that the public is not exposed to radiation emissions above levels of the standard.

The bureau also supports research to expand knowledge of microwave radiation biological effects.