

Sidestep The Food Troll

Food additives have been around for centuries. The ancient Egyptians used food colouring and flavouring, and the ancient Romans were into the use of spices, salt and vegetable colourings.

There was also a time when foods were grown and eaten directly from the wild. The gatherers and hunters had an abundance of wild life and plants to choose from. To preserve their food, salting, pickling and smoking methods were used – we still do it, albeit in a modern way. However, human population increased and expanded, farming cleared the land and town markets became popular resulting in the developing of different ways of food preparation and preservation. A food evolution was eminent. The food industry started to develop as challenges were embraced – the new ways of preparation, storage and waste disposal had to be addressed and, suddenly, we were looking at the advanced modern food industry as we know it today.

Chemicals, pesticides and artificial flavourings and colourings were, and still are, added to preserve and manipulate our food; to make our foods look more fresh, natural and appealing than the original item. Some of the foods are drenched in chemicals. Take a look in your pantry – do you have artificial sweeteners or coffee creamers on the shelf? Do yourself a favour and read the labels. The chances are that you have been, and still are, eating plenty of food containing artificial additives, but are not aware of it.

Over the past 50 years food additives have been studied by researchers, government bodies and manufacturers. A whole industry has developed around these additives while some of these have been reported to offer health benefits; others have shown to have the opposite effect. Facts that can be agreed upon are that most additives are used solely to enhance the appearance of food, to promote a longer shelf-life and to be more palatable to consumers. ⇨



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It is important to stay informed about the health risks associated with processed food and food additives, but this is where you, as the consumer and responsible parent, decide what is best for your family's lifestyle. You may consider healthier alternatives which could taste just as good, or even better, as the artificially enhanced one.

Changing habits is not something that can be achieved overnight. Even making small changes is a step in the right direction – remember, every proactive step can be an exciting culinary adventure towards a natural health care lifestyle. There will be many bridges to cross on this journey, but as long as you are aware of the troll that is hiding under the proverbial bridge or in this case among the words on the label, you can stay on track.

It is very difficult to avoid all foods that contain any additives, since chemicals can be added to the finished product and when looking at fresh produce, it is not always possible to remove these completely by washing as some residues will be left behind.

This is where organically produced and certified products come into play. If the organic option is not available or plausible, you must learn as much as possible about additives, artificial and natural, to enable you to identify the more dangerous and harmful ones. Although there is a risk to everyone, children are the most vulnerable.

One of the quaint behavioural tendencies of the human being, you and I included, is the fact that we become blasé towards overexposure – being it the beautiful scenery outside our lounge window or the continual blatant scaremongering of products and complementary therapies, or the repetitiveness of political arguments and larger than life advertisements. We don't notice those any more. We have become selective in our listening, in our osmotic reaction to visual overload. Although this behaviour is exactly what the advertisers want from us – the foundations of these bombardments are rock-solidly implanted in our subconscious. So when I remind you, yet again, to read the labels before you purchase any given

product, do you switch off mentally, or do you look the food troll in the eye and sidestep it?

Flavour is our sensory impression of a food and is determined by taste and smell. Therefore, flavour enhancers are of extreme importance to food manufacturers – to lure us into their parlour of gastronomical enchantment. Additives such as flavour enhancers are added to commercially produced food products which taste appeals to the consumer. Interestingly, our senses cannot distinguish between a chemical that is naturally present in food and that same chemical present as an additive.

Additives include preservatives that prevent food from spoiling through bacteria growth; antioxidants that prevent the fats in food from going rancid; and then there are the emulsifiers, stabilisers, sweeteners, and acidulants that maintain the taste of food. Without additives many foods would be green with mould, salt would clump, peanut butter would separate and some even protect us from food poisoning.

Start by phasing out some **Key Additives**

1. Acesulfame-K

Artificial sweetener – baked goods, chewing gum, gelatine desserts, diet soda, dry mixes for beverages, instant coffee and tea, puddings and non-dairy creamers

This sugar substitute is almost 200 times sweeter than sugar. It is often used together with sucralose. Two studies show that the additive can cause cancer in rats which means it may cause cancer in humans.

2. Aspartame – E951

Artificial sweetener – diet foods, no-sugar added products, soft drinks, drink mixes, sweetener packets, gelatine desserts, low calorie frozen dessert

Various studies suggest aspartame may cause brain tumours in rats, leukaemia and breast cancer. It can also occasionally trigger urticaria (nettle rash), itchy hives and swelling of the body. Some people complain it triggers headaches, dizziness and nausea. It is also linked to hyperactivity, behavioural problems and allergies. Avoid this artificial sweetener and make sure that young children and pregnant women do not consume foods and beverages sweetened with aspartame, saccharin (350 times sweeter than sugar, and associated with a higher incidence of bladder cancer; E954) and sucralose (E955).

These sweeteners are not restricted to confectionary only; it is being used in a wide range of food products and in medicines. NZ Safe Food Campaign co-convenor Alison

White agrees that no parent who is aware of adverse affects from this controversial sweetener would want to willingly give medicine, dietary supplements or any food containing it to their children. The unfortunate part is that parents have often very little choice since in New Zealand aspartame is found in at least 81 medicines designed for children and Britain has issued a warning for at least three of these medicines. You are looking at a billion dollar global artificial sweetener industry – this sweetener market is worth US\$1.3bn with sucralose the number one artificial sweetener ... and still expanding.

3. Artificial colourings

(see *Artificial Additives, Part 1, Healthy Options, April '09*)

Most artificial colourings that are used in food are synthetic dyes which have been suspected of being toxic or carcinogenic – many have been banned. They are linked to allergies, asthma and hyperactivity. Keep an eye on the E-numbers when reading the food labels.



4. Butylated Hydroxyanisole (BHA) E320 and Butylated Hydroxytoluene (BHT)

E321

Antioxidant – cereals, chewing gum, potato chips, vegetable oils, may not be listed

Both these closely-related chemicals retard rancidity in fats, oils and oil-containing foods; they are totally unnecessary and might cause cancer in humans.

5. Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) E621

Flavour enhancer – packet soup, salad dressing, chips, frozen entrees, instant drinks, restaurant foods, yeast extract, soy sauce, actually in over 10,000 foods

It is an amino acid that brings out the flavour in food. Studies show people who are sensitive to MSG can experience any of the following – headache, nausea, weakness and burning sensation in the back of the neck and forearms, wheezing, changes in heart rate and difficulty breathing, depression and mood swings.

6. Sulphites

(Sulphur dioxide E220, Sodium sulphite E221, Sodium bisulphite E222, Sodium metabisulphite E223, Potassium metabisulphite E224, Potassium sulphite E225, Potassium bisulphite E228)

Preservative, bleach – dried fruit, wine, processed potatoes, cold drinks, fruit juice concentrates, smoked and processed meats, jelly, jam, bread, cheese

Sulphiting agents prevent discolouration (dried fruit, some “fresh” shrimp, and some dried, fried or frozen potatoes) and bacterial growth (wine). They also destroy vitamin B1 and can cause severe reaction in asthmatics in the form of gases that cause lung irritation. They are sprayed onto foods to keep



them fresh and prevent discolouration or browning. Beware of lettuce and potatoes served at restaurants that are left in a sulphite solution for too long and when you ask for lemon juice in your cup of tea, make sure it is from freshly-squeezed lemon and not bottled lemon juice as this often contains sodium bisulphite. If you suffer from bronchitis, emphysema, bronchial asthma or cardiovascular disease, avoid E220 at all cost.

7. Sodium nitrate E250; Sodium nitrite E252

Preservative, colouring, flavouring – bacon, ham, frankfurters, luncheon meats, smoked fish, corned beef

It stabilises the red colour in cured meat, without it some meat will look grey and it also gives the characteristic flavour. Sodium nitrate slowly breaks down into sodium nitrite which can lead to the formation of small amounts of potent cancer-causing chemicals called nitrosamines. A person sensitive or allergic to nitrite can experience headache, stomach upset or have an asthmatic reaction.

8. Sodium benzoate E221; Benzoic acid E210

Preservative – fruit juice, carbonated drinks, pickles, jam

Sodium benzoate has antibacterial and antifungal properties for prevention of food spoilage. Although sodium benzoate and benzoic acid appear to be safe for most people they can cause hives, asthma or other allergic reactions in sensitive people; ADHD children’s behaviour may be affected adversely too. When sodium benzoate is used in beverages that also contain vitamin C, the two substances react together to form small amounts of benzene, a chemical that causes leukaemia.

9. Olestra

Artificial fat, fat substitute – potato chips, snack food

Olestra is not digested, so it doesn’t add calories, fat or cholesterol to food. Unfortunately, as it speeds through your digestive system, it takes along some fat-soluble carotenoids from fruit and vegetables. In excess, it can cause diarrhoea and loose stools, abdominal cramps and flatulence. 🍌