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Which Food Additives Are Safe? Which Aren't?

(Center for Science in the Public Interest) Would you like some butylated hydroxytoluene with that?

If a waiter offered you some BHT in a restaurant, you'd probably decline. Yet that chemical is one of scores of hard-to-pronounce additives that routinely show up in the fine print on packaged foods' ingredients lists. Is BHT safe? For the record, food manufacturers use it to keep oils from going rancid, but animal studies differ on whether it promotes or prevents cancer. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, publisher of *Nutrition Action Healthletter*, says it warrants caution. *Nutrition Action's* revised "Chemical Cuisine," its classic guide to food additives, is the cover story in the May issue.



"Just because an additive is artificial doesn't necessarily mean it's unsafe," said CSPI executive director Michael F. Jacobson, who began researching food additives in 1971. "That said, the Food and Drug Administration hasn't done nearly enough to police the preservatives, dyes, emulsifiers, stabilizers, thickeners, sweeteners and other chemicals many of us eat every day."

Chemical Cuisine ranks additives as "safe," "cut back," "caution," "certain people should avoid," and "everyone should avoid." Some additives that fall in the latter category include:

Acesulfame potassium, Aspartame, Saccharin. Those artificial sweeteners are either unsafe or poorly tested. The only artificial sweetener to get a "safe" grade is sucralose (Splenda).

Partially hydrogenated oil. This is one artificial food ingredient that CSPI has asked the FDA to get out of the food supply, since its trans fat component is a potent cause of heart disease and possibly other health problems. Yet Burger King and many other restaurants still deep fry with it; many manufacturers of frozen foods par fry with it; and some manufacturers, restaurant chains, and bakeries still use it in pie crusts, pastries, and other foods.

Potassium bromate. This chemical strengthens dough, and most of it breaks down harmlessly. But bromate itself does cause cancer in animals, and isn't worth the small risk it poses to humans. Many bakers have stopped using bromated flour.

An example of an additive that "certain people should avoid" is:

Mycoprotein Fortunately, this substance—a vat-grown fungus—is only in the Quorn line of meat substitutes. Several percent of people who eat it will experience nausea, severe vomiting, or dangerous anaphylactic reactions. (If you are one of them, report your symptoms here<.) Despite CSPI's warnings, FDA refuses to take it off the market or require labeling.

CSPI says these food additives are safe:

Maltodextrin. This thickening agent and sweetener is made from starch. You might find it in canned fruit, salad dressings, and instant puddings.

Sodium Carboxymethyl-Cellulose. This thickening and stabilizing agent prevents sugar from crystallizing and is used in ice cream, beer, pie fillings, icings, diet foods, and candy. Studies indicate it is safe.

Thiamin Mononitrate. Scary name, perfectly safe ingredient. It's a form of vitamin B-1 used to fortify cereals and flour.

Sucralose. Don't believe the manufacturer's claim that this sweetener is "natural" or "tastes like sugar since it's made from sugar." But also don't believe the Internet conspiracy theories that it's toxic; it appears to be safe. Used as a tabletop sweetener (Splenda) and in some baked goods, frozen desserts, and diet soft drinks. Unfortunately, it's often used with acesulfame.

Jacobson says that while it's important to pay attention to the presence of many of these food additives, one shouldn't fetishize them at the expense of several ingredients whose presence we take for granted in foods, namely sugar—in both its naturally occurring forms and in high-fructose corn syrup—and salt.

"Obesity, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure are such problems in this country in part because Americans are eating way much more sugar and salt than our bodies can handle," said Jacobson. "They're both perfectly 'natural' ingredients but everyone should cut back."