

Beware of These Top 10 Scary Food Additives

There was a time when "fruit flavoured" and "cheese flavoured" meant "made with real fruit" and "made with real cheese." Today? It's artificial everything. Our fruit comes packaged in Loops, our cheese delivered via Whiz. Sure, it's edible, but there's no way your great grandparents would recognize this junk as food.

The problem with additives runs deep. The FDA currently maintains a list of ingredients called *Everything Added to Food in the United States* (EAFUS), which features more than 3,000 items and counting. Thankfully, most EAFUS ingredients are benign, but a few of them do have potentially harmful effects. Why they're legal is a mystery to us. Some of them might be backed by powerful lobby groups, while others probably survive simply because some guy at the FDA has too much paperwork on his desk and hasn't made time to adequately review the data.



Scary Ingredient #1: Olestra

Where you'll find it: Lay's Light chips, Pringles Light chips

A fat substitute synthesized by Procter & Gamble. Because human digestive enzymes can't break down the big molecules, Olestra contributes 0 calories to your diet.

Why it's scary: In the late '90s, Frito-Lay released Olestra-enhanced WOW chips and Procter & Gamble introduced Fat Free Pringles. Both products were required to carry warning labels to notify customers about the risk of "loose stools." Within 4 years, some 15,000 people had dialed in to a hotline set up specifically to handle adverse-reaction complaints. Apparently the complaints didn't move the FDA, because in 2003, the administration revoked the warning-label mandate. If you want to take your chances with diarrhoea, go ahead, but first consider this: Olestra also appears to interfere with the body's ability to absorb some crucial nutrients like beta-carotene and lycopene. To counteract the effect, processors add some nutrients back, but it's unlikely that all the blocked nutrients are adequately replaced.

Furthermore, just last week I tweeted that an animal study at Purdue University found that fake fats like Olestra may cause more weight gain than real fat.

Scary Ingredient #2:

Caramel Colouring

Where you'll find it:

Colas and other soft drinks, La Choy soy sauce, Stove Top stuffing mix

Caramel colouring is an artificial pigment created by heating sugars. Frequently, this process includes ammonia.



Why Caramel colouring is scary: Caramel colouring shows up in everything from soft drinks and sauces to breads and pastries. When made from straight sugar, it's relatively benign. But when produced with ammonia it puts off 2-methylimidazole and 4-methylimidazole, chemicals that have been linked to cancer in mice. The risk is strong enough that the California government, a bellwether

for better food regulation, categorized 4-methylimidazole as “known to cause cancer” earlier this year. Unfortunately, companies aren't required to disclose whether their colouring is made with ammonia, so you'd be wise to avoid it as much as you can.

Scary Ingredient #3: Saccharin

Where you'll find it: Sweet 'N Low, cola

An artificial sweetener discovered by accident in the 1870s.

Why it's scary: Studies have linked saccharin to bladder tumors in rats, and in 1977, the FDA required warning labels on all saccharin-containing foods. In 2000, the agency changed its stance and allowed saccharin to be sold without warning labels. But that doesn't make it entirely safe. A 2008 Purdue study found that replacing sugar with saccharin in rats' diets made them gain more weight, proving once again that you should be aware of these faux fat foes.

Scary Ingredient #4: Potassium Bromate

Where you'll find it: Johnny Rockets Hoagie Roll

A compound that conditions flour and helps bread puff up during baking.

Why it's scary: Potassium bromate causes thyroid and kidney tumors in rats, and it's banned from food use in many countries. In California, products containing potassium bromate are required to carry a cancer warning. Fortunately, negative publicity has made the additive relatively rare, but until the FDA banishes it, you should remain on the lookout.

Scary Ingredient #5:

Butylated Hydroxyanisole (BHA) and Butylated Hydroxytoluene (BHT)

Where you'll find it: Goya lard, Golden Grahams, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Orbit gum
Petroleum-derived antioxidants and preservatives.

Why they're scary: The Department of Health and Human Services says BHA is “reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen,” yet the FDA allows it to be used anyway. BHT is considered less dangerous, but in animal research, it too has resulted in cancer. Oddly, the chemicals aren't even always necessary; in most cases they can be replaced with vitamin E.

Scary Ingredient #6: Partially Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil

Where you'll find it: McDonald's McChicken, Long John Silver's Broccoli Cheese Soup

A semi-solid fat created when food processors force hydrogen into unsaturated fatty acids.

Why it's scary: Partially hydrogenated fats are the principle sources of trans fat in the American diet, and a Harvard study estimated that trans fat causes 70,000 heart attacks every year. The good news: Partially hydrogenated oils are beginning to slowly retreat from our food. Progressive jurisdictions like New York City are starting to restrict the allowable amounts in restaurants, and many chains are switching to healthier frying oil. Still, the battle isn't over. At Long John Silver's, for example, there are still 17 menu items with more than 2 grams of the stuff. According to the American Heart Association, that's about the maximum you should consume in a single day.

Scary Ingredient #7: Sulfites

Where you'll find it: Wine, Sun-Maid Mixed Fruit, Jolly Ranchers, Fig Newtons
Preservatives that maintain the colour of food, and by releasing sulphur dioxide, prevent bacterial growth.

Why it's scary: Humans have used sulfites to keep food fresh for thousands of years, but some people—especially asthma sufferers—experience breathing difficulties when exposed. In the 1980s, unregulated use resulted in at least a dozen deaths, prompting the FDA to slap warning labels on wine bottles and develop new guidelines for proper use. Now restaurants can no longer soak fresh ingredients in sulfites. According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest, there have been no known deaths since the new legislation took hold. The bottom line: If you're among the majority of people not sensitive to sulfites, consumption won't hurt you. If you're not sure, ask your doctor for a test.

Scary Ingredient #8: Azodicarbonamide

Where you'll find it: Dunkin' Donuts bagels, McDonald's burger buns
A synthetic yellow-orange dough conditioner

Why it's scary: This chemical is used most frequently in the production of industrial foam plastic, and although the FDA has approved its use for food in the States, the United Kingdom has labelled it a potential cause of asthma. In a review of 47 studies on azodicarbonamide, the World Health Organization concluded that it probably does trigger asthmatic symptoms. The WHO concluded, "exposure levels should be reduced as much as possible." I'll put it more concisely: Avoid it.

Scary Ingredient #9: Carrageenan

Where you'll find it: Weight Watchers Giant Chocolate Fudge Ice Cream Bars, Skinny Cow Ice Cream Sandwiches, Creamsicles
A thickener and emulsifier extracted from seaweed.

Why it's scary: Seaweed is actually good for you, but carrageenan is a mere seaweed byproduct. Through animal studies, it has been linked to cancer, colon trouble, and ulcers. It isn't certain that carrageenan harms humans, but avoiding it is clearly the safer option. Most studies examined degraded forms of the additive, and research from the University of Iowa found that carrageenan could be degraded through the normal digestive process.

Scary Ingredient #10: Ammonium Sulfate

An inorganic salt that occurs naturally near active volcanoes and is used commercially to nourish yeast and help bread rise.

Why it's scary: This nitrogen-rich compound is most often used as fertilizer, and also appears commonly in flame retardants. Thankfully, the ingredient only sounds scary—a 2006 Japanese rat study found the additive to be non-carcinogenic. Both the Center for Science in the Public Interest and the FDA deem it safe.