

The Household Toxic Tour: Kitchen

Our foods these days are filled with many added chemicals called intentional additives. These may be artificial sweeteners, preservatives, colourants, flavourants, flavour enhancers etc. Some of these additives have been linked to health problems (such as cancer, asthma and hyperactivity) and have been banned in other countries. However, they are still allowed in our foods in South Africa. Some of the more dangerous chemical additives to be aware of include:



Flavourants or flavour enhancers have been linked to asthma attacks, gout, hyperactivity, and allergies. The most well-known flavourant is **Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)**. MSG is found in chips, soups, cold meats, Bovril, Soya products, pasta-and-sauces, stock powders and many other savoury foods. MSG has been linked to hyperactivity. It can kill nerve cells, resulting in diseases such as Huntington's, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Pregnant women, children and those with heart disease must be especially careful of MSG. MSG can sometimes be hidden under the name hydrolysed

vegetable protein (HVP). Wherever possible buy foods that have natural flavours.

Artificial sweeteners are found in many so-called "diet" products as well as in children's fruit squashes, sweets, jellies, ice-creams and fizzy drinks. There are four commonly used sweeteners. Of these, cyclamate, saccharin and acesulfame may cause cancer. Aspartame may lead to mental retardation. Many people have reported dizziness, headaches, epileptic-like



seizures, and menstrual problems after ingesting aspartame.



Artificial colourants are used in most children's sweets, in fruit squashes, jellies, breakfast cereals, chips, jams, cheeses, cold meats (e.g. polony) and many convenience foods. All *certified* food colours in use today are of a class of chemicals called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons that are suspected to cause cancer. A well-known colourant which dyes food yellow (tartrazine), has been linked to cancer, asthma attacks, nettle rash in children, tumours, chromosomal damage and hyperactivity. It has been banned in some European countries. Whenever possible choose foods with natural colourants.

Preservatives are added to foods to make them last longer. Some of the preservatives to be aware of include:

- **Sodium nitrite and sodium nitrate** which are used to preserve meat and are commonly found in cold processed meats, such as polony, ham, vienna sausages etc. They may cause stomach cancer. A number of studies have found that, if pregnant women eat a lot of meat which contains nitrates/nitrites, their children have a higher chance of developing brain tumours. There is also a link between nitrates/nitrites and childhood leukaemia.



- **Sulphites** are used to keep fruits and vegetables looking fresh. They are used in dried fruits and in some fruit squashes (under the name **sulphur dioxide**). In America sulphites have been banned from most fruits and vegetables after at least 12 people died from having an asthma attack after eating food preserved with sulphites.
- **BHA & BHT** are added to oil-containing foods to prevent oxidation and retard rancidity. According to the World Health Organization BHA may cause cancer.
- **Carboxymethylcellulose** is a stabilizer, used in ice cream, salad dressing, cheese spreads and chocolate milk. It has produced cancer in 80% of rats in an experiment on laboratory animals.



There are natural preservatives that can be used instead. Examples are vinegar, salt, sugar, rosemary, listeria and honey. Potassium sorbate can be used to inhibit mould growth. Lactic acid bacteria kill pathogenic bacteria.



Caffeine is found naturally in tea, coffee, and cocoa. It is also added to many soft drinks. It is a stimulant, raises blood pressure, may cause nervousness and insomnia (difficulty sleeping). It may also cause birth defects such as cleft palates, missing fingers and toes, and skull malformations. It is addictive.

Pesticides, although not an intentional additive, are found in much of our foods. DDT, which is still used in South Africa, has been linked to breast cancer. Try and buy foods which are labelled "pesticide free" or "organic". Wash fruit and vegetables well before eating - some pesticides are made not to wash off in the rain!

Spray & Cook and similar aerosol coating products contain propellants, which are known to cause damage to the nervous system and brain.

Food Packaging

Experiments have shown that when food is wrapped in plastic wrap, the chemicals in the plastic wrap are absorbed by the food. Some of these chemicals may cause hormonal problems, such as lowering the sperm count in men.

Bisphenol A is a chemical found in the plastic lining of some food cans. This chemical may leach from the can into the food inside the can. This chemical is a "reproductive toxicant" meaning it can affect the unborn foetus. Male laboratory animals exposed to LOW levels of bisphenol-A in the womb had enlarged prostate weight as adults, shrunken epididymides (sperm-carrying ducts), and reduced sperm counts.

Some tin cans are sealed with lead solder (lead-soldered cans have a thick, wide seam on the outside). Lead damages the kidneys and the reproductive system and can lead to Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) in children and adults. Empty such cans immediately once you've opened them.

Buying Tips

Read labels! Buy products that are labelled "Preservative free", "MSG free", "Tartrazine free", "Pesticide free", "Organic" etc. (And while you are at it, why not also buy products which are "GMO

free”, “cruelty free”, “hormone free” as well as “free range” animal products too?) Wherever possible, buy organically grown food. Besides being free of chemicals, these foods have been shown to have a higher nutritional value. Try to use the alternatives to plastic products whenever possible. For example, buy food in glass, paper or cardboard containers. At home, avoid heating food in plastic containers, or storing fatty foods in plastic containers or plastic wrap and avoid all PVC and styrene products. Be especially vigilant when buying products for pregnant woman, children and people with already weakened immune systems (especially those who are HIV positive). The first 20 years of life are believed to be the most crucial in terms of preventing or contracting serious illnesses associated with chemical exposure. Wherever possible avoid buying the following products:

- pesticides,
- foods which primarily contain flavourants, colourants and preservatives (such as some fruit squashes, fizzy drinks, polony, most sweets & chips)
- air fresheners (unless they are free of propellants, formaldehyde and artificial fragrances)
- benzene
- leaded paint
- hair spray
- firelighters
- jeyes fluid
- spot removers
- Aerosol products (deodorants, hair sprays, furniture polish, Spray ‘n Cook etc), unless they are pump action and do not contain propellant
- PVC toys, teething rings, dummies or teats
- Perfumed products (for example, perfumed bleach or detergents, scented furniture polish, perfumed lotions and face creams etc).