

detox your diet

The simple ways to avoid troubling ingredients by Marygrace Taylor

You already know that committing to healthy eating goes beyond avoiding trans fats and getting more veggies—it also means choosing foods that are free of things like high fructose corn syrup or pesticides. But there are other chemicals and additives common in packaged foods that are worth steering clear of. Meet three of the biggest offenders here; keeping these out of your kitchen will help make your family's food as natural as possible.

ANTIBIOTICS

To boost milk production, many conventional dairy cows are injected with the synthetic hormone recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH), or recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST). The hormones can cause painful udder infections, so the cows are given antibiotics to keep them from getting sick or contracting any other diseases or infections. "I call it dirty dairy," says Robyn O'Brien, founder of the AllergyKids Foundation and author of *The Unhealthy Truth*.

Where they are: Animals given antibiotics are required to go through a withdrawal period before slaughtering. (Hormones are not used in the raising of chickens, but antibiotics may be used to prevent disease.) However, some activists are still concerned about the use of antibiotics at all. Antibiotics are not used on organic farms: "No growth hormones and antibiotics are allowed, and the animals have to be fed organic crops," says O'Brien.

Why they're bad: The concern about overexposure to antibiotics (even through eating animal products treated

with antibiotics) is two-fold: It contributes to the evolution of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, requiring more and more antibiotics to be used, says O'Brien. Plus, overexposure to antibiotics can also wipe out good bacteria in the body, which could result in compromised immunity, since those good bacteria help keep us from getting sick in the first place.

How to avoid them: You can choose meat that's labeled as "no hormones administered" and "no antibiotics added," and poultry that's labeled as "no antibiotics added" and "no hormones administered," as these labels and terms for meat and poultry are regulated by the USDA. When it comes to dairy, the only way to make sure a product is hormone- and antibiotic-free is if it's certified organic, because labeling dairy products with terms related to hormones and antibiotics is not government regulated, says O'Brien.

GENETICALLY MODIFIED INGREDIENTS

Some crops are genetically modified to be more resistant to insects and diseases; to create the seeds to grow them, certain genes are artificially inserted into a plant's DNA sequence.

Where they are: The foods that can be genetically modified are soybeans, canola, corn, sugar beets, alfalfa, and cottonseed (which can be used to make cottonseed oil), all of which end up in a wide variety of processed packaged foods, and in the case of alfalfa, conventional livestock feed. Small



amounts of zucchini, yellow squash, and Hawaiian papaya can also be genetically modified.

Why they're bad: Some experts suspect genetically modified foods (also called GMOs, for genetically modified organisms) have played a role in the staggering increase of childhood food allergies in recent years by introducing foreign proteins into the food supply, says Charles Benbrook, Ph.D., chief scientist at The Organic Center, a nonprofit research organization focused on the environmental and consumer health benefits of organic food and farming. Since no human trials have ever been done, there currently isn't conclusive scientific evidence to support this, but a 2011 study from the University of Sherbrooke Hospital Centre in Quebec suggests an emerging connection: Researchers found proteins from genetically modified (GM) corn in umbilical cord blood, debunking previous theories that those proteins are destroyed by stomach acid before they ever have a chance to get into the bloodstream.

Since the biotechnology industry frequently changes proteins produced within GM crops, a fetus exposed to one type of GM corn protein could be exposed to another type (or even a non-GM type of corn) after birth, with troubling results. The child's body could see these new proteins as foreign invaders, creating the potential for an allergic reaction, Benbrook says.

How to avoid them: Foods containing GM ingredients aren't required to be labeled in the U.S., so try to steer clear of goods containing GM crops or ingredients derived from them (like soy protein isolate or canola oil). Instead, look for packaged foods that specifically indicate they're GMO-free, like those certified by the Non-GMO Project (nongmoproject.org).

ARTIFICIAL PRESERVATIVES

Manufacturers add artificial preservatives to food to extend its shelf life at the grocery store—and its life in your fridge or pantry at home.

Where they are: You'll find them in a wide range of packaged foods, from bread to juice to hot dogs.

Why they're bad: Butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) is used to keep fats in foods like vegetable oils or potato chips from going rancid, and is believed to be a human carcinogen by the National Toxicology Program. High doses of two other preservatives (butylated hydroxytoluene, or BHT, and propyl gallate) may potentially have a link to cancer in animals, suggests research from some animal studies. Sodium nitrates and nitrites that preserve some cured meats and fish may pose a specific health risk to kids and pregnant women. Other artificial preservatives, such as sulfites and sodium benzoate, pose risks for people with asthma or allergy sensitivities. Sulfites, which preserve the color in dried fruits, pickles, and fresh or frozen shrimp, may trigger asthma symptoms; sodium benzoate keeps acidic foods (such as soda) free of bacteria growth but has the potential to cause hives or other allergic reactions.

How to avoid them: Truly natural foods won't contain artificial preservatives, though they may contain naturally derived preservatives, like citric acid, to keep foods from spoiling too quickly. But since the term "natural" isn't regulated the way "organic" is, some foods that call themselves natural could still contain artificial additives. Your best bet: Read the ingredient list. Find something you're unsure of? Check the Center for Science in the Public Interest (a consumer advocate organization) additive database at cspinet.org/reports/chemcuisine.htm. ●

THESE INGREDIENTS ONLY SOUND SCARY

Natural-food advocates often say the best way to avoid unnatural eats is by steering clear of anything you can't pronounce, or that your grandmother wouldn't recognize. But there are plenty of odd-sounding ingredients that actually do come from natural places. Here are five you're likely to spot in many packaged foods.

Citric acid A natural preservative found in citrus fruits, it keeps foods like ice cream and fruit juice from oxidizing (going rancid).

Carrageenan The thickening agent is derived from seaweed to improve the texture of foods like jelly and cottage cheese.

Inulin A naturally occurring soluble fiber that's sometimes added to dairy products, frozen

desserts, and salad dressings.

Lecithin An emulsifier, which prevents ingredients from separating, found in baked goods, chocolate, and margarines (including non-hydrogenated varieties), it typically comes from soybeans and egg yolk.

Oligofructose A plant extract, commonly from chicory root, that's used to sweeten cookies or granola bars for fewer calories than sugar.

