Which Food Additives Should You Avoid?
Part 1: The Good, The Bad & The Ugly

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I have been getting a lot of questions lately about food ingredient labels. That's because in today's internet world everyone is an "expert" wanting to be heard. Couple that with the fact that old news is boring, and we have a problem. All of these experts have to keep coming up with information that is novel and scary. It doesn't need to be true - just novel and scary.

The warnings about which food ingredients to avoid are a perfect example. A few years ago it was pretty simple to know which ingredients to avoid. If you avoided foods with sugar, refined flour, trans fats and all that artificial stuff, you were OK. However, in recent years the list of ingredients to avoid keeps getting longer and longer.

It has reached the point where it is getting really hard to find a food or food supplement that doesn't have any of the ingredients on the "naughty list". You may even be wondering if there is anything besides organic fresh fruits and vegetables that you actually can eat. How did we get to this point?

The answer is obvious. All the internet "experts" needed something new to warn us about so they took molehills and turned them into mountains. They took food ingredients that might cause a few problems for a limited number of people and characterized them as ingredients that were dangerous for everyone. Their posts were picked up and repeated by other "experts" and pretty soon everyone thought they had to be true. The warnings about food ingredients became what I call "urban nutrition myths".

It is time for a myth buster to come along and help you sort through all of the ingredient warnings so that you know which ones are true and which are myths. That's something I enjoy doing. Let me be your guide.

Which Food Additives Should You Avoid?

My "research" for this article began by Googling "Food Ingredients to Avoid" to see what was on the internet. Starting from the top of the list that came up on Google, here are the articles I found:

Men's Fitness: "The 9 Scariest Food Additives You Are Eating Right Now "
(http://www.mensfitness.com/nutrition/avoid-these-9-worst-food-ingredients)

Waking Times: "20 Ingredients to Memorize and Avoid In Any Food You Consume
(http://www.wakingtimes.com/2013/03/04/20-ingredients-to-memorize-and-avoid-in-any-food-you-consume/)

Women's Health: "7 Ingredients Nutritionists Always Avoid" (http://www.womenshealthmag.com/nutrition/avoid-these-ingredients)

Reader's Digest: "4 Most Harmful Ingredients In Packaged Foods" (http://www.rd.com/health/diet-weight-loss/4-most-harmful-ingredients-in-packaged-foods/)

Huffington Post: "10 Of The Worst Toxic Food Ingredients" (http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/04/17/worst-toxic-food-ingredients_n_3101043.html)

WebMD did not even weigh in on the issue of food ingredient warnings. Reader's Digest and the Huffington Post included mostly the ingredient warnings that we have been hearing about for years. The other three articles included some of the newcomers to the ingredient warning list. By combining all 5 of those articles, I came up with 25 of the most frequently mentioned "dangerous" food ingredients and have divided them into 3 categories. I call them "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly".

This week I will help you identify the "good ones" - those food ingredients that are on many of the internet "naughty lists", but are actually OK for most people most of the time. Next week, I'll be back with the bad and the ugly lists.

Food Ingredients: The Good

I would be the first to admit the using the word "good" as a descriptor for food ingredients is a bit of a misnomer. The word "good" should really be reserved for organic fresh fruits and vegetables along with other whole, unprocessed foods. Of course, the problem is that most of us don't eat enough of those foods, so we need to know which ingredients in the processed foods and food supplements we eat are OK.

The list of food ingredients that are perfectly OK for most of us would be a long one, so let me just mention a few that have inadvertently slipped onto the online "naughty lists" that you may have seen.

GMO: Let me be perfectly clear. I am no fan of GMO foods, but ingredients derived from GMO foods are a very different story. I have covered this topic in detail in my previous articles "Should GMO Labeling Be Required For All Food Ingredients?" (http://healthtipsfromtheprofessor.com/gmo-labeling-required-food-ingredients/) & "Will Non-GMO Foods Be Less Nutritious?" (http://healthtipsfromtheprofessor.com/will-non-gmo-foods-be-less-nutritious/) and my webinar "The Truth About Genetically Modified Foods" (http://healthtipsfromtheprofessor.com/videos/), so let me just summarize the key points here.

* GMO foods and proteins derived from GMO foods can be a problem because of food sensitivities to the modified proteins. That risk is real, but is difficult to quantify.

* All other food ingredients derived from genetically modified foods contain no genetic information

or proteins. They are chemically & biologically indistinguishable from the same ingredients derived from non-GMO foods. Consequently, there are no health risks associated with these food ingredients.

* I am aware of the recent internet chatter about the WHO declaring that Roundup can cause cancer. What is missed in these discussions is that Roundup is also approved for use just prior to harvest for non-GMO foods such as wheat and beans. That means that some non-GMO foods are more likely to be contaminated with Roundup residues than are GMO foods.

* That just leaves the environmental issue. Roundup does break down relatively quickly in the environment, but I do have concerns about spraying tons of the stuff on our crops every year. However, I must acknowledge that many of my scientific colleagues do not share this concern, and they are not all in bed with Monstanto.

Soy: This is another topic I have covered extensively in my previous articles such as "Soy and Breast Cancer Recurrence" (http://healthtipsfromtheprofessor.com/soy-and-breast-cancer-recurrence/) & "Soy and Breast Cancer" (http://healthtipsfromtheprofessor.com/soy-breast-cancer/) and my video "The Truth About Soy" (http://healthtipsfromtheprofessor.com/videos/). Once again, I will just give a brief summary.

* The myths that soy consumption causes breast cancer or any other cancer, lowers testosterone levels in men and interferes with thyroid metabolism have been disproven by multiple clinical studies.

* The idea that soy has to be fermented to be healthy is also a myth. Most soy products are processed in such a manner that the toxins in the soy bean are removed.

* For ingredients made from soy such as soy lecithin, there are no health risks associated with sourcing them from GMO soy (see above). If you are consuming a soy protein product, however, I do recommend that you choose non-GMO soy.

Carrageenan: Carrageenan comes from seaweed and red algae. It has been used in foods for thousands of years because of its gelling properties. In the supplement world it is used to improve consistency and the disintegration of tablets.

There is a lot to like about carrageenan. It is natural, organic and non-GMO. Why then has it become an internet villain in the food ingredient world? The problem is that most of the internet "experts" who are vilifying carrageenan are not distinguishing between carrageenan and its breakdown product poligeenan. Here are the facts:

* In some animal studies poligeenan at very high doses has been shown to cause diarrhea, hemorrhaging & ulcerations of the colon and even colon cancer. Not all animal studies agree, but this does raise the possibility that high doses of poligeenan might cause the same effects in humans.

* Food grade carrageenan contains <5% poligeenan and does not raise the same concerns.

o Food grade carrageenan does not cause gastrointestinal problems in most animal studies. Nor has it been shown to cause cancer in any animal study.
o The FDA, USDA and WHO have reviewed all available studies and have concluded that food grade carrageenan is safe.
o The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has concluded that carrageenan does not cause cancer.

Caramel Color: I won't go into detail here, but the argument is similar to carrageenan. It is a minor impurity of caramel coloring that is the concern. However, caramel coloring itself should not be a concern for products made by any reputable manufacturer that employs rigorous quality control tests on their ingredients.

Canola Oil: Canola oil is an excellent source of monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats, especially the beneficial omega-3 polyunsaturated fats. In supplements it is primarily used as a source of healthy fats and to improve taste, aroma or texture. There are some legitimate concerns with canola oil, but they have been considerably overhyped. This is a perfect example of a molehill being turned into a mountain. Let's look at the myths that are simply untrue and the facts that have been overhyped.

* Myth #1: Canola oil contains the same toxins as the original rapeseed oil. Fact: The toxins found in rapeseed oil has been removed through conventional plant breeding. Canola oil is toxin free.

* Myth #2: Canola oil is toxic in animal studies. Fact: When you look at those studies carefully they were either done with rapeseed oil or were done under conditions where almost any vegetable oil would have been problematic.

* Fact #1: Canola oil is highly processed. That's true, but so are most other vegetable oils. If you want a less processed oil, choose virgin olive oil. (Unfortunately, it is not found in many processed foods or food supplements - probably because of cost). Some experts recommend palm oil or coconut oil, but they have their own problems because of their high saturated fat content.

* Fact #2: Most canola oil comes from GMO plants. That is true, but canola oil is a highly purified food ingredient. As described above, that means there are no health concerns from eating GMO canola oil, only a possible environmental concern.

Maltodextrin: Maltodextrin is a natural food ingredient made from enzymatically digesting starch. It is used as a stabilizer and thickener in foods. It is also combined with glucose and fructose in sports drinks to provide sustained energy.

* Myth #1: The internet is filled with claims that maltodextrin causes gastrointestinal problems or that it is unsafe. There is very little evidence to back that up, and we need to consider those claims in

light of the fact that we produce lots of maltodextrin in our intestines every day as we digest the starches in our diet.

* Myth #2: "Maltodextrin is just another sugar. It is just another way for food manufacturers to hide the total amount of sugar in their products." Maltodextrin is actually less sweet than most sugars. As described above, it is primarily added to foods for reasons other than to impart sweetness.

* Fact: Most of the maltodextrin in the US does come from GMO corn. Once again, it is a highly purified food ingredient. As with canola oil that means there are no health concerns, only possible environmental concerns.

Just because these ingredients are on my "good list" doesn't mean that they won't cause problems for some people. Lots of people have food allergies. My dad, for example, was allergic to chocolate, which has to be one of the cruelest food allergies that someone could have. Sometimes food allergies can be quite severe. Just ask someone with severe peanut allergies what life can be like if they even come near a peanut.

My point is that any natural food or food ingredient can cause allergic reactions in some people. That doesn't make them bad. It is just part of normal living.

Next week I will be back with "the bad and the ugly" food ingredients. Stay tuned.

The Bottom Line

If you were to believe everything you read on the internet about food ingredients that you should avoid, you could end up spending most of your day reading food labels and still find very few foods that you could eat. Some of those warnings are true, some are partially true, and some are mostly myths.

To help you sort through this confusing information I have identified the top 25 food ingredient warnings and have divided them into the good, the bad and the ugly. This week I covered the "good ones".

1) The "good" are those food ingredients that are perfectly OK for most people, most of the time. Here are some examples (see the article above for a full explanation).

o Soy: The supposed dangers of soy have been disproven by numerous clinical studies, but the myths persist. I do recommend that you choose non-GMO soy protein.
o GMO: GMO foods and proteins are a concern, but purified food ingredients obtained from GMO foods pose no health risks. There are, however, possible environmental concerns due to the overuse of Roundup when those GMO foods were grown.
o Carrageenan and Caramel Color: In this case it is contaminants rather than the food ingredients themselves that are the problem. As long as you choose a manufacturer who performs rigorous quality

control tests on their ingredients, you need not be concerned about these ingredients.

o Canola Oil, Maltodextrin and Soy lecithin: The supposed dangers of these food ingredients are myths. They are not backed up by credible clinical studies. However, they are generally derived from GMO foods, so there is a possible environmental concern.

2) Just because these food ingredients made my good list doesn't mean they are OK for everyone. People can be allergic to certain food ingredients, just as they can be allergic to certain foods.

These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This information is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.

About The Author

Dr. Chaney has a BS in Chemistry from Duke University and a PhD in Biochemistry from UCLA. He is Professor Emeritus from the University of North Carolina where he taught biochemistry and nutrition to medical and dental students for 40 years. Dr. Chaney won numerous teaching awards at UNC, including the Academy of Educators "Excellence in Teaching Lifetime Achievement Award". Dr Chaney also ran an active cancer research program at UNC and published over 100 scientific articles and reviews in peer-reviewed scientific journals. In addition, he authored two chapters on nutrition in one of the leading biochemistry text books for medical students.

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