

Dangers of Food Dyes

These artificial additives carry a host of health risks

Since the 1970s, research has linked synthetic food colorings to behavioral and other health problems, especially in children. Recent studies confirm those findings, and in June 2008, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) petitioned the FDA to ban eight food dyes approved for use in the United States. This move follows the British government's recent efforts to pressure food manufacturers to stop using the six artificial colors currently allowed in the UK. "The cast of characters is slightly different [here], but the concerns are the same," says David Wallinga, MD, director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy's Food and Health Program. The European Parliament declared that, in response to a 2007 study and other research, foods containing the dyes must display a warning label. This research found that giving a blend of food dyes and the preservative sodium benzoate to children ages 3 to 9 increased hyperactivity. As a result, many food manufacturers—including multinational corporations like Kraft, Mars, and McDonald's—use few or no synthetic colors in products made for the UK. Those same foods produced for the US market, however, still contain artificial colorings. While the FDA considers CSPI's petition, here's what you should know about food dyes and how to avoid them.

Food Coloring Basics Food manufacturers use synthetic petroleum-based coloring agents to give color to otherwise colorless foods (such as lime sherbet), to color "fun foods" like sprinkles, or to correct natural variations in color. "It's important to note that these are unnecessary additives—they're cosmetic," says Dr. Wallinga. Manufacturers producing foods for the UK have begun using natural alternatives, such as annatto (yellow), beet juice (red), pumpkin and carrot extract (orange), and turmeric (yellow). These appear to be safer than syn-

thetic colors, but carmine or cochineal extract, a natural reddish coloring agent made from dried cochineal beetles, has caused adverse reactions in several people. The FDA recently required that it be listed clearly on ingredient labels.

Effects on Health Almost all research on food dyes has focused on children's health, although a few studies have linked dyes to asthma and hives in adults as well as in children. Several studies show an association between synthetic food dyes and hyperactivity and other behavior problems in children—even in children not diagnosed with these issues. Other health risks include eczema, sleep disturbances, and lowered zinc levels, which may reduce immunity. "Children are vulnerable because [they] have developing brains," says Dr. Wallinga, "but if adults have conditions they think might be exacerbated by these dyes, they may want to remove them from their diet."

What You Can Do The eight food dyes allowed in the US are Yellow 5 and 6, Red 3 and 40, Blue 1 and 2, Green 3, and Orange B; of those, research links Yellow 5 (also called tartrazine) to the most health problems. You can avoid nearly all artificial colorings by eating whole, unprocessed foods.

To determine if packaged or prepared foods contain synthetic dyes, read labels and check the "Brain Food Selector," a searchable database at iatp.org (also available on the site is Dr. Wallinga's fact sheet "Smart Guide to Food Dyes"). You can report adverse reactions at cspinet.org/fooddyes and ask the FDA to grant CSPI's petition by contacting the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. Finally, ask restaurants and schools to avoid artificial colors or clearly note if they are present.

.....
This monthly column on nutrition is produced in collaboration with the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine. For more information, visit its website at integrativemedicine.arizona.edu.