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The 10 Scariest Things in Your Food

Chemicals that are used as weed killer, flame retardant, and sun-screen are startlingly common in your supermarket. But you won't find "carcinogens," or "paint chemicals" on the back panel. They'll be hidden under names like "Butylated HydroxyAnisole" or "natural flavoring." Break through the science experiment to find out what you're really eating.

Here are the 10 scariest ingredients in your food:

Acesulfame Potassium (Acesulfame-K)

WHAT IT IS: A calorie-free artificial sweetener 200 times sweeter than sugar. It is often used with other artificial sweeteners to mask a bitter aftertaste.

FOUND IN: More than 5,000 food products worldwide, including diet soft drinks and no-sugar-added ice cream.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Although the FDA has approved it for use in most foods, many health and industry insiders claim that the decision was based on flawed tests. Animal studies have linked the chemical to lung and breast tumors and thyroid problems.

Aspartame

WHAT IT IS: A near-zero-calorie artificial sweetener made by combining two amino acids with methanol. Most commonly used in diet soda, aspartame is 180 times sweeter than sugar.

FOUND IN: More than 6,000 grocery items including diet sodas, yogurts, and the table-top sweeteners NutraSweet and Equal.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Over the past 30 years, the FDA has received thousands of consumer complaints due mostly to neurological symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, memory loss, and, in rare cases, epileptic seizures. Many studies have shown aspartame to be completely harmless, while others indicate that the additive might be responsible for a range of cancers.

Titanium Dioxide

WHAT IT IS: A component of the metallic element titanium commonly used in paints and sun-

screens. The food industry adds it to hundreds of products to make overly processed items appear whiter.

FOUND IN: Processed salad dressing, coffee creamers, and icing.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Titanium is a mined substance that's sometimes contaminated with toxic lead. Plus, most white dressings (like creamy ranch) aren't great for you anyway. Both your health and your waistline will fare better if you go with an olive oil- or vinegar-based salad topper instead.

Glyphosate

WHAT IT IS: The active ingredient in the popular weed killer Roundup. It's used on corn and soy crops genetically engineered to withstand a heavy dosing of the chemical.

FOUND IN: Most nonorganic packaged foods containing corn- and soy-derived ingredients. Because it's a systemic herbicide, it's taken up by the plant—meaning you eat it.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Glyphosate exposure is linked to obesity, learning disabilities, and infertility.

Butylated HydroxyAnisole (BHA)

WHAT IT IS: A petroleum-derived antioxidant used to preserve fats and oils.

FOUND IN: Beer, crackers, cereals, butter, and foods with added fats.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Studies have shown BHA to cause cancer in the forestomachs of rats, mice, and hamsters. The Department of Health and Human Services classifies the preservative as "reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen."

Interesterified Fat

WHAT IT IS: A semi-soft fat created by chemically blending fully hydrogenated and non-hydrogenated oils. It was developed in response to the public demand for an alternative to trans fats.

FOUND IN: Pastries, pies, margarine, frozen dinners, and canned soups.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Testing on these fats has not been extensive, but the early evidence doesn't look promising. A study by Malaysian researchers showed a 4-week diet of 12 percent interesterified fats increased the ratio of LDL to HDL cholesterol. Furthermore, this study showed an increase in blood glucose levels and a decrease in insulin response.

Red #3 (Erythrosine) and Red #40 (Allura Red)

WHAT THEY ARE: Food dyes that are orange-red and cherry red, respectively. Red #40 is the most widely used food dye in America.

FOUND IN: Fruit cocktail, candy, chocolate cake, cereal, beverages, pastries, maraschino cherries, and fruit snacks.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: The FDA has proposed a ban on Red #3 in the past, but so far the agency has been unsuccessful in implementing it. After the dye was inextricably linked to thyroid tumors in rat studies, the FDA managed to have the liquid form of the dye removed from external drugs and cosmetics.

Yellow #5 (Tartrazine) and Yellow #6 (Sunset Yellow)

WHAT THEY ARE: The second and third most common food colorings, respectively.

FOUND IN: Cereal, pudding, bread mix, beverages, chips, cookies, and condiments.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Several studies have linked both dyes to learning and concentration disorders in children, and there are piles of animal studies demonstrating potential risks such as kidney and intestinal tumors. One study found that mice fed high doses of sunset yellow had trouble swimming straight and righting themselves in water. The FDA does not view these as serious risks to humans.

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