

VILLAGE VIEW

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It wasn't too long ago that the list of those unpronounceable items added to food packages were largely ignored by consumers. Nobody paid much attention, confident that anything sold for human consumption was fit to eat.

Then came a spate of warnings from diet specialists, natural food buffs, and even the federal government. Additives, we were warned, could be detrimental to our health. Everything from lipstick to lasagna was tested. Eggs and steak, we learned, threaten fatty deposits in our arteries and high cholesterol counts in our blood.

Bread. Hardly more nutritious than woodchips. Sugar. A source of empty calories. Salt. Bad for our blood pressure. Saccharin. A possible cause of cancer.

About all that was left to us for sustenance were fresh fruits and vegetables, and those were apt to have been sprayed with poisons quite as capable of killing us as the insects the farmers and orchardists were attempting to eradicate.

As a result of the publicity about additives in our food, many people began looking more closely at labels and found it true, indeed; a plethora of strange substances finds its way into cans, jars, bottles and packages containing, we had assumed, only the menu item indicated on the front of the label in large colorful letters designed to separate us from our grocery dollars. The small print on the reverse, it turns out, is as informative and important when choosing a can of corn, a tin of tuna fish or a jar of jelly as when we're signing a legal document.

Are all food additives as evil as organic farmers and natural food aficionados believe, or are they protecting us from food poisoning or rapid deterioration of packaged foods we buy? Part of our confusion is lack of knowledge about which food additives are used, what purposes they serve, and how to determine which ones may be useful, which may actually enrich foods, and which might be better avoided.

Some additives are preservatives, some are flavor-enhancers, some do nothing more than improve texture or color and appearance. Among preservatives, BHA and BHT are sometimes added to oil-based products to prevent rancidity. You may find them in bouillon cubes or prepared bread and cake mixes. Growing controversy about too-liberal use of these chemicals may influence you to choose brands that don't include them.

Breads often contain calcium propionate to inhibit mold and bacteria growth. This chemical is believed perfectly safe and the calcium supplements other sources of this important nutrient.

Many soft drinks, colas in particular, contain caffeine, a stimulant that adds nothing healthful to our diet; most adults suffer no ill-effects from small quantities of caffeine, but professionals suggest pregnant women avoid it entirely. Coffee may be your morning pick-me-up, but if you're pregnant, you may opt for milk.

A sharp glance at the stock on your pantry shelves may make you more aware of the many products containing monosodium glutamate and diglycerides. Breads, canned soups, vegetables, meats and fish are all likely to contain these food fats used to preserve freshness and texture. Unless you've a mono allergy, they do no harm, according to experts.

Carrageenan, frequently added to syrups and creams to keep them from separating, comes from seaweeds and is harmless. It may even contain some trace elements that are good to you.

Some foods and beverages contain natural chemicals which, when canned, could react with metal and contaminate the food. Canned shellfish often contains EDTA to eliminate that possibility. Beer is often laced with EDTA before it's canned. EDTA is innocuous, we're told, as is the tongue-twister dioctyl sodium sulfosuccinate found in certain powders to help them dissolve readily in water.

Meat packers feed us sodium erythorbate but not because it adds anything to our nutrition; it keeps meats from turning gray upon contact with oxygen; thus the products appear more appetizing. No one has proved the deception does any harm other than making us think the meat is better than it may actually be.

Serious questions are being raised about the additives sodium nitrate and sodium nitrite commonly found in lunch meats and hot dogs, even though these protect against botul-

ism, a virulent poison found in improperly cured foods. Although not considered a cure worse than the disease, perhaps we'd be wise to restrict our uses of these popular fast-food items.

Additives such as sorbic acid, ascorbic acid, propylene glycol, the parabens, pectin, manitol, glycerin, fumaric acid, hydrolized vegetable protein, sodium benzoate and the polysorbates have all been given a green light, and most of us can eat foods containing them without concern. Those of us on low-salt diets, of course, should avoid foods containing sodium or sodium derivatives.

Food, the kind of food that not only satisfies our stomachs but our nutritional needs as well, and that doesn't contain potentially harmful substances, is as much a responsibility of the consumer as of producers and packers. Once a food additive is clearly identified as a carcinogen or as threatening our health in some other way, of course, the Food and Drug Administration orders it removed from grocery shelves. Some additives, however, defy the best efforts of chemists to determine their safety; foods containing chemicals suspected to be dangerous can be avoided by consumers who take time to read labels.

Knowing what not to purchase and using common sense will soon drive products containing suspicious additives from the market. All we need do is stop buying blindly and start paying attention to the labels listing contents of packaged foods displayed in stores.

The additives mentioned here by no means comprise a complete list of those found in foods today; these, however, are among those commonly mentioned on jars, cans and packages. If we familiarize ourselves with their attributes, we'll have taken another step toward better understanding the effects of what we chew up and swallow.

Not everything put in our food threatens us with future sickness. It's unnecessary to die of starvation to avoid a risky diet. We do need to read labels and choose from among brands that offer the least harmful additions. There are plenty of alternatives. Taking a few extra moments to determine which may be safest for human consumption could add a number of good healthy years to our lives.

That's an additive worth making an effort to obtain.