Food Additives You Might Want to Subtract From Your Diet

Many food additives serve useful purposes. They keep bread from developing mold, slow the growth of bacteria in wine plus prevent oils from turning rancid, fruit from browning and peanut butter from separating. Others just add color or flavor. For the vast majority of people, additives pose little or no health hazard. But for a few, some additives may be a big headache—literally.

According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI), food additives are not likely to trigger true allergic reactions. But a few people seem to be sensitive to certain additives and experience allergy-like symptoms including rashes, itching, nausea, headaches, even difficulty breathing.

Here, EN presents five groups of additives identified by AAAAI as potentially troublesome.

Aspartame
A.K.A.: NutraSweet, Equal. What It Is: Non-caloric sweetener made from two amino acids; approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Found In: Soft drinks, juices, cereals, ice cream, puddings, gelatin desserts, chewing gum, mints. Health Concerns: Though unconfirmed, adverse reactions have been reported to the FDA (more than for any other additive), including headaches, dizziness, nausea, respiratory problems, itching and hives. Anyone with the genetic disorder phenylketonuria (PKU) must avoid aspartame altogether.

BHA and BHT
A.K.A.: butylated hydroxyanisole and butylated hydroxytoluene. What They Are: Preservatives and antioxidants used to retard spoilage and prevent changes in flavor, color and texture in both high-fat and dry foods; considered GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe) by the FDA. Found In: Cereals, seasonings, frosted cereals, dessert mixes, instant potatoes, packaged popcorn, baked goods, pie crusts, meat products, chewing gum. Health Concerns: There’s conflicting information about whether they promote or prevent cancer and inconclusive evidence of side effects. Complaints have included rashes, hives and a “tight” chest.

FD&C Yellow Dye No. 5
A.K.A.: tartrazine. What It Is: Certified artificial food coloring. Found In: Beverages, dessert mixes, custards, seasonings, pickles, relish, baked goods (cookies, wafers), bread mixes, frosting, packaged potatoes and pastas, mints, candy, baked snacks, beverages, pie dough, ice cream. Health Concerns: May cause itching, hives and runny nose in a small number of people, more so in aspirin-sensitive people who also have asthma.

MSG
A.K.A.: monosodium glutamate. What It Is: Flavor enhancer that imparts a supposed “fifth taste” sensation called “umami”; considered GRAS by FDA. Found In: Condiments, soups (including broth and bouillon), sauces, canned beans and chili, seasoning mixes, dips, rice mixes, gravies, chips, Asian cuisine. Health Concerns: May trigger reactions in people with asthma and in people who eat large amounts of the additive, especially on an empty stomach. Reactions include facial and chest pressure, tingling, numbness, burning on back of neck, skin flushing, headache, nausea, dizziness, drowsiness and difficulty breathing.

Sulfites
A.K.A.: sulfur dioxide, sodium sulfate, sodium or potassium bisulfite, sodium or potassium metabisulfite. What They Are: Preservatives used primarily to prevent discoloration of dried fruit and inhibit bacterial growth in wine. Found In: Dried fruit, peeled and dried potatoes, marinated, sauces, rice mixes, mustard, molasses, candy, fruit juice, bottled lemon juice, shrimp, vinegar, wine (especially white), beer. Health Concerns: A small percentage of people are sensitive to sulfites. The most common reaction is difficulty breathing, though life-threatening anaphylactic-like events are rare. Stomach upset, nausea and hives have also been reported. Anyone with asthma may want to avoid sulfites altogether (consult your doctor). Read product labels and take extra precautions when dining out.

—Andrea Klauser, M.S., R.D.