

Something to consider for the diet conscious

Preservatives are a part every meal and every snack - and though they're found in almost everything students eat that isn't fresh or homemade, the safety of some of these preservatives has not been fully proven or established.

Butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) and butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) are among the most commonly used and potentially harmful preservatives in the United States.

The Registry of Toxic Effects of Chemical Substances contains a multitude of experiments that have shown BHT and BHA to cause cell mutations, tumor formation and organ system toxicity and neurotoxicity found in low doses.

Of course, there have been countless other experiments conducted on the effects of BHT and BHA, and many have shown that they are both safe. The Food and Drug Administration has continuously claimed that both BHT and BHA are generally recognized as safe for use in both food and cosmetics.

Curiously, the European Union has banned the use of BHA in all fragrance products and other countries such as Japan, Romania and Sweden have completely prohibited the use of BHT. In the United States, the state of California lists both BHT and BHA as carcinogens.

BHA seems to be of special concern to researchers. The International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of the World Health Organization, considers BHA to be "possibly carcinogenic to humans."

In addition, The National Toxicology Program was established by the Department of Health and Human Services to coordinate research and provide information on potentially toxic chemicals. They have recently declared BHA as "reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen."

"BHT, as well as BHA, is a synthetic antioxidant added to the food to protect it from oxidation and rancidity of unsaturated fatty acids in food," said Atif Awad, an associate professor of exercise and nutrition sciences. "They are safe and approved by the FDA."

BHT and BHA now replace the natural antioxidants that were used in food before the FDA approved synthetic preservatives.

"BHT and BHA are cheaper than the natural antioxidants such as vitamin E," Awad said. "The difference is that we can store the vitamin in our body but not the synthetic antioxidants."

Perhaps this is why BHT and BHA are omnipresent in grocery stores. BHT can be found in products such as cereals, potato chips, meats and a variety of snack foods. BHA is often found in conjunction with BHT in beverages, ice cream and baked goods. As food manufacturers have demonstrated with their reduction in the quality of food over time, cheaper is better.

However, eliminating both BHT and BHA from one's diet would not be as taxing as it appears. The ingredients are clearly listed on food products and there are many organic and natural alternatives, few of which are more expensive.

Though some have called for a complete elimination of the use of BHT, it's been disputed. BHT is currently being tested as an anti-viral and it has shown to be particularly promising as a herpes combatant. The preservative is even available as a dietary supplement in capsule form.

In a society rampant with obesity, heart disease and cancer, it is critical that students make an informed decision about what they eat. Remaining aware of current health controversies involving food is imperative for making the best diet decisions to improve one's quality of life and overall health.

E-mail: features@ubspectrum.com

About the Author

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