

Tips on reading ingredient labels

Q. I read ingredients labels but can't always understand them. Can you tell me what the letters mean and why these preservatives are added to the food?

A. Preservatives used in our food today perform one or both of two major functions: As antimicrobial agents, they keep food from spoiling; and as antioxidants, they keep food from becoming rancid or developing off-colors or flavors.

Antimicrobial agents inhibit or prevent mold, yeast and bacteria growth that spoils foods. Antioxidants are found in many foods — particularly those containing fats and oils — to prevent rancidity and slow the development of off-flavors, colors and odors which is caused by the food being exposed to oxygen, moisture, heat and certain enzymes present in many natural fats.

Until the 1970s, the FDA listed more than two dozen antimicrobial and antioxidants on its GRAS (Generally Recognized As Safe) list. Since then a review of these agents has been started to reaffirm their safety.

Here is a brief description of some commonly used additives and their use in foods:

ASCORBATES AND ERYTHRATES: (ascorbic acid, ascorbyl palmitate, calcium ascorbate, erythorbic acid, sodium ascorbate, sodium erythorbate).

Use: In small amounts to inhibit enzymatic browning and/or as preservatives in foods and beverages.

Foods: meat products, concentrated milk, baked goods, candy fats and oils, breakfast cereals, processed fruits and vegetables.

Ascorbic acid (vitamin C) is used mostly as an antioxidant but can act as antimicrobial agent in some foods.



consumer mailbag

Terry Gibb

BENZOIC ACID and Sodium Benzoate:

Use: As an antimicrobial agent which is especially effective against yeast and bacteria.

Foods: condiments, relishes, sugar substitutes, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, candy, chewing gum, baked goods, frozen dairy products.

Benzoic acid also occurs naturally in some foods: raspberries, cranberries, cloves, tea and anise to name a few.

BHA (BUTYLATED hydroxyanisole) a BHT (butylated hydroxytoluene):

Use: As antioxidants to retard rancidity in many foods containing fats and oils and in certain processed meat products.

Foods: breakfast cereals, chewing gum, potato chips, candy, enriched rice, potato flakes, convenience foods.

PARABENS: (methyl paraben and propyl paraben)

Use: To inhibit mold and yeast.

Foods: processed vegetables, baked goods, fats and oil, sugar substitutes, seasonings, processed fruits, jams and jellies, grain products, gelatins and puddings, candy, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.

PROPIONIC ACID and its salts: (calcium propionate, sodium propionate, dilauryl thiodipropionate acid).

Use: Usually in combination with

emulsifying agents to prevent fungi and bacteria that cause rope in baked goods. This rope produces off-flavor, discoloration and softening.

Foods: primarily in baked goods. Propionic acid is found naturally in many dairy products.

PROPYL GALLATE: Use: As an antioxidant in combination with BHA and BHT.

Foods: fats and oils, meat products, snack foods, baked goods, nuts, grain products, frostings, chewing gum, frozen dairy products, gelatins and puddings, beverages.

SORBIC ACID and its salts: (calcium, potassium and sodium sorbate).

Use: As an antimicrobial agent.

Foods: baked goods, fats and oils, milk products, cheese, frozen dairy products.

Sorbic acid and potassium sorbate are the only sorbates used as a preservative.

The Consumer Mailbag answers your questions. Address mail to The Consumer Mailbag, Concern Detroit, 1023 Shelby, Detroit, 48226.

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Gordon R.A. Fishman, MD

Diplomat of the American Board of Ophthalmology

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weld the retina in place. The newer Yag laser was first employed to place holes in the cloudy skin or "capsule" of the natural lens in the eye following cataract surgery. In glaucoma it has been used to make tiny holes in the colored part of the eye called the iris. Each year new uses for lasers have been discovered, and in the future lasers will play an even more important part in the treatment of eye disease. Important to note is the current misconception that the laser is used to remove cataracts. Lasers have been used to soften a cataract but they have never been used to remove them.

For your FREE copy of Dr. Fishman's brochure "EYE CARE" write to him at 1777 Axtell Rd., Troy, MI 48064 or 23700 Orchard Lake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48024



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