[IMAGE]

Hidden Dangers Common Foods

By Nancy Irven, DC

You may have heard this before, but it deserves repeating: Many prepackaged and processed foods contain non-nutritious chemicals and food additives, including one or more of the following three ingredients: refined grains, trans fats and refined sugars. If we remove these three ingredients, we automatically remove many others simply by association.

For example, refined grains are listed as enriched wheat, cracked wheat, stone ground wheat, fortified multigrain, rice and puffed rice. The label must say whole wheat or brown rice if the grain is whole. Many manufacturers are now advertising that their products are made with whole wheat. Look closely at the list of ingredients; if *whole wheat* is not listed first, it is not the primary ingredient. Many of the products list the whole wheat much further down the list of ingredients, which indicates less of it in the product.

Since January 2006, trans fats have been listed in the box labeled "nutrition facts." Products can say "zero trans fats," and yet if you look in the list of ingredients, you will see the words *partially hydrogenated vegetable oil*, which is another name for trans fats. By law, the manufacturers can put "0" trans fats in the nutrition facts if a serving contains less than .5 grams of it. Serving sizes have been greatly reduced due to this legislation. For example, the serving size for some chips is now six chips. What chip eater only eats six chips? The bottom line is there is no safe level of trans fats, yet they are in thousands of foods marketed as "healthy" and eaten daily.

Refined sugars are listed as high-fructose corn syrup, glucose, fructose, maltodextrin, sorbitol, mannitol, dextrin and maltose. None of these sweeteners provides superior nutrition because of the refinement process. When molasses or cane sugar is refined, the process removes approximately 95% of chromium, 89% of manganese, 98% of cobalt, 83% of copper, 98% of zinc and 98% of magnesium from the original food. High-fructose corn syrup may even be worse than other refined sugars because it does not stimulate the hormone leptin, which normally makes us feel full. Therefore, a product with high-fructose corn syrup can contribute to overeating and obesity.

image - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Dangerous foods can be defined as nutritionally deficient, frequently consumed and advertised to have "health benefits." The following foods have been chosen because in many cases, they contain refined grains, trans fats and/or refined sugars, and are consumed as daily "staples" in the majority of more than 1,000 diet diaries I have reviewed.

Breakfast Cereals

Most people start their day with some brand of cereal that may advertise numerous health benefits on the front of the box or package. When the list of ingredients is closely examined, you'll find as many as 32 items. Among these ingredients, usually in the first few listed, are the refined grains, partially hydrogenated vegetable oils and refined sugars. These ingredients are in hundreds of breakfast cereals, especially the colorful cereals with various shapes that are heavily marketed to children. The remaining ingredients often include food coloring agents and synthetic nutrients such as thiamin mononitrate, which is made from coal tar. This long list of ingredients offers minimal nutrition.

Try Instead: Look for cereals with little or no added sugar and a short list of ingredients you can pronounce. Whole grains should be at the top of the ingredients list.

Margarine and Butter Substitutes

Margarine is partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. This trans fat was advertised heavily for several decades as a healthy alternative to butter. Most of today's new butter replacements are not much better. Take a close look at the products that advertise "No Trans Fats" and "Proven to Significantly Lower Cholesterol." More often than not, you'll see the partially hydrogenated vegetable oil in the list of ingredients.

Try Instead: Experiment with olive oil, hummus, honey, or pureed fruits as toppings, depending on the meal, or use a real butter sparingly if you can't resist.

Breads, Bagels, croissants...

Most commercial breads are made with enriched wheat, partially hydrogenated vegetable oils and refined sweeteners such as high-fructose corn syrup. The lengthy list of ingredients includes the isolated synthetic ingredients also found in breakfast cereals. When examining the many bread choices available, bread that provides superior nutrition can be hard to find, but with some effort and label-reading, it can be done.

Bagels, English muffins and croissants also contain enriched wheat, refined sugars and in some products, trans fats. Many people believe these types of breads are healthier than "regular" bread, but in far too many

cases, inspection of the ingredients list does not support this perception.

Try Instead: As with cereals, look for bread products made primarily with whole grains and a few other ingredients (water, yeast, honey and perhaps a touch of salt).

Health Food Bars

The name suggests that they offer good nutrition, but in many cases, closer examination shows enriched wheat, trans fats and refined sugars. Most of these contain the same non-nutritious ingredients found in breakfast cereals, just in the form of a bar.

Try Instead: Look for whole-food bars containing natural sources of protein, complex carbohydrates and nutrients: whole grains, nuts and seeds, and fruits and vegetables.

Flavored and Vitamin-Enriched Water

These products are much more popular today than five years ago. They are flavored with a multitude of different types of refined sugars. (*Hint:* The flavor is sugar.) The vitamins are the synthetic isolated vitamins that in most cases are made from coal tar (petroleum) from China.

Try Instead: When did good old water lose its appeal? You can always mix three or four parts water to one part 100 percent fruit juice; you'll get a little flavor without any of the negatives except a little added natural sugar.

Crackers, Pretzels and Popcorn

Crackers are viewed as healthier than cookies, but a closer look at the labels often reveals enriched wheat, partially hydrogenated vegetable oils and refined sugars such as high-fructose corn syrup. Pretzels and popcorn are both considered healthy snacks, but pretzels often contain enriched wheat and partially hydrogenated fats (trans fats), and most microwave popcorn contains trans fats.

Try Instead: Pop your own popcorn (it's less expensive and better for you - just use canola or olive oil and salt sparingly), or look for natural prepackaged options. When shopping for crackers and pretzels, think whole grain and all-natural.

Salad Dressings

A number of salad dressings contain high-fructose corn syrup and partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. The low-fat dressings are often higher in refined sugar.

Try Instead: Many conventional markets are now joining health-food stores in offering organic and all-natural salad dressings. And then there's the old standby: oil and vinegar.

Pasta

Pasta comes in many shapes and sizes. It is most often made out of enriched wheat. The vegetable pastas are made out of durum semolina, which is not whole wheat.

Try Instead: Whole-wheat pasta isn't difficult to get used to, taste-wise, especially when you're topping it with a rich (natural) tomato sauce. The health benefits are far superior to standard durum pasta.

What Have We Learned?

All of these foods can contain superior nutrition if they include whole grains, healthy fats and non-refined sugars, but unfortunately, most don't. Truly superior nutrition requires returning to a diet that excludes prepackaged foods and convenience or fast foods. It requires taking the time to read through a list of ingredients to know what you are eating, and choosing whole foods. Talk to your doctor for more information about the hidden dangers in common foods and how you can avoid them.

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