**[THE FACTS ON FOOD ADDITIVES: Reading nutrition facts](http://www.themindfulword.org/2012/nutrition-facts-food-labels/" \o "THE FACTS ON FOOD ADDITIVES: Reading nutrition facts food labels)**

How many of you woke up this morning, sat down at the breakfast table and without a thought, poured your favourite cereal into a bowl with your milk of choice? You may have read the back of the box—an advertisement for something health-related or completed the maze—depending on the cereal. You may have looked over the nutrition facts food labels trying to assure yourself that you are, in fact, eating [healthy food](http://www.themindfulword.org/2012/urban-farming-healthy-food/). But are you really?

Many of us assume that because a certain product is available, it must be safe and good for us. We don’t even bother reading the ingredients, focusing our attention solely on that big block of nutrition facts—the breakdown of nutrients in each serving. The ingredients are written in a much smaller font, usually below these “facts”—after consumers are sold on the idea that the food contains the perfect balance of calories, fat, carbohydrates and vitamins.

“Total Blueberry Pomegranate” cereal was recently pulled from the market after a simple [investigation](http://www.foodinvestigations.com/) (i.e. reading of the ingredients) revealed that the cereal contained neither blueberries nor pomegranates. Yet, until the product was pulled, consumers believed that they were consuming a healthy product. A simple glance at the ingredients would have shown that chemicals and additives were masquerading as dried fruits in a “100 per cent nutritious” cereal.

As many of the ingredients in highly processed foods are listed in scientific terms, most of us would require a team of PhDs or a pharmacopeia to discern what we are really eating. What exactly is BHTor artificial flavours? Both are commonly found in many processed foods—but the average person couldn’t tell you what they are, what they do, or even what they taste like. Yet, we continue to consume these additives without understanding the impact they may have on our health.

Remember Olestra? The “fat-free” oil that allowed us to eat all the potato chips we wanted, because its fat could not be absorbed into the body? Many people jumped to buy products prepared with Olestra, without considering that it may be unwise to consume a product that cannot be digested. Even the U.S. Food & Drug Administration gave its stamp of approval. And when later reports of severe intestinal problems surfaced, the makers of Olestra quickly scaled back its marketing of the so-called fat-free oil. But if consumers had researched the risks and side effects of this “miracle” oil, instead of entrusting marketing executives and government officials with their health, it would have saved millions in healthcare costs from Olestra-related illnesses.

A product is not safe just because an item receives government approval. There are numerous examples of chemical food additives that are known health hazards, but at one point, were approved for human consumption. Boric acid, saccharin, and safrole are just a few. What about the products deemed safe in some countries, yet banned in others? Nations across the globe frequently disagree on the effects and safety of food additives. Still, we continue to blindly trust that the foods we consume are safe, without even questioning what’s really behind the packaging.

Beyond temporary digestive issues, food additives are said to have caused serious illness—cancer, reproductive disorders, and heart disease, among others. And do those additives tested and proven safe for digestion retain their safety when combined with other chemicals? Studies suggest otherwise, as several respectable medical journals, including [The Lancet](https://thelancet.com/), have published findings that certain combinations of food additives cause increased hyperactivity in children.

Dietary experts recommend limiting consumption of processed foods to those containing less than five ingredients. The thinking is that more ingredients equals greater health risk. Experts also suggest that we don’t consume products that contain ingredients that we cannot pronounce. I’m willing to take this a step further—even if you can pronounce them, make sure that you understand what they are and what they do to your body. I can say the word “nitrate,” but that doesn’t mean it isn’t a known carcinogen. It’s best stick to whole foods—organic produce, antibiotic- and hormone-free meats, and unrefined grains and legumes. Foods that provide all of the nutrients you need, without the preservatives and unhealthy additives. Why would you need anything more?

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