

West Coast Families

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to School!**

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Additive-Free Lunches

By Gloria Tsang, RD

Although it may not be on any lesson plan, one important subject for all families this fall is food additives. There are more and more of them in the foods we eat every day. With kids heading back to school, it's time for parents to start learning about what's lurking in the foods they're planning to pack for lunch.

Some food additives actually serve a nutritional purpose—like the B vitamins added to white flour, or the folic acid added to some breakfast cereals—but others are worth watching out for. Some food additives are used only to enhance the shelf life of a product, or give it a colour or texture that consumers will find appealing. Studies are starting to show that some of these additives can be harmful—even increasing cancer risk—so as parents and consumers we really need to understand what is in the foods we choose.

If you've been buying pre-packed meals for your kids' lunches, watch out—they're simply loaded with food additives, including preservatives, artificial sweeteners, and dyes. Here's a list of some of the worst additive offenders, along with replacement options that are additive-free.

Cured meats and cold cuts: Bacon, turkey slices, ham, and hot dogs are loaded with sodium nitrite, a preservative that leads to the formation of carcinogenic compounds in foods. Manufacturers add yet another additive—ascorbic acid—to suppress the formation of the carcinogenic compounds.

Healthy alternative: Use leftover chicken or turkey breast from last night's dinner, or choose uncured cold cuts that are nitrate-free.

"Diet" (no-fat/fat-free/sugar-free) yogurt: Yogurt becomes much less healthy when natural sugars and fats are removed and replaced with artificial sweeteners, like acesulfame-K.

Healthy alternative: Choose natural, organic yogurt with a short ingredient list.

Potato chips: Chips and snack foods often contain BHA and BHT, which are added to prolong shelf life. Some studies suggest these additives may be carcinogenic.

Healthy alternative: Instead of packaged chips, pack a bag of popcorn (not the microwave kind). It's a whole grain that's low in calories.



Soft drinks: Soda often contains artificial sweeteners and dyes made from coal tar. Both may increase cancer risk, and some dyes may cause allergic reactions.

Healthy alternative: The best drink to pack is water, but if your kids want something with flavour, choose 100% fruit juice (not punch or fruit drink) or milk.

Baked goods: Commercially processed baked goods like scones and cookies may contain partially hydrogenated vegetable oils—which form trans fats and affect blood lipids—as well as artificial sweeteners that may increase cancer risk.

Healthy alternative: Next time you bake at home, double or triple the recipe and freeze the extras. Then just grab a treat from the freezer when you pack your kid's lunch!

The foods we pack for our kids' lunches shouldn't have ingredients we can't recognize, pronounce, or understand. By using these healthy alternatives, you can pack a healthy lunch you'll feel good about, in about the same amount of time. ■

Gloria Tsang is a nutrition expert and founder of www.HealthCastle.com. You can find more healthy eating tips from Gloria online.

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