

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Natural vs. Artificial Flavors: Which is Better ?”

Let's start with a wordy definition. Natural and artificial flavors are defined in the Code of Federal Regulations as follows: "A natural flavor is the essential oil, oleoresin, essence or extractive, protein hydrolysate, distillate, or any product of roasting, heating or enzymolysis, which contains the flavoring constituents derived from a spice, fruit or fruit juice, vegetable or vegetable juice, edible yeast, herb, bark, bud, root, leaf or similar plant material, meat, seafood, poultry, eggs, dairy products, or fermentation products thereof, whose significant function in food is flavoring rather than nutritional." Artificial flavors do not meet this definition. But, there is little substantive difference in the chemical compositions of natural and artificial flavorings. The distinction in flavorings (natural versus artificial) comes from the *source* of these identical chemicals. Artificial flavorings are simpler in composition. The reason that artificial colors and flavors are used is because when foods are heavily processed to withstand long periods on a grocer's shelf, they become devoid of nutrients, color and flavor, so they must be added back. Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is hidden in processed food and has more than 25 other different names. It meets the definition of natural flavors because it comes from glutamate which is found in nature, but MSG is still a known excitotoxin. As a flavoring, it has a savory taste, but it's also responsible for foods like cookies and chips having an addictive quality. It's associated with obesity, migraines, fatigue, depression, brain lesions, neuro-endocrine disorders like diabetes, and neurodegenerative disease like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Former head of the FDA, Dr. David Kessler said in an interview with CBS about food flavoring, "We're living in a food carnival. These flavors are so stimulating they hijack our brain." Another common additive flavoring is castoreum, which is a part of "natural" vanilla and strawberry flavors and is a bitter, orange-brown, odiferous, oil secretion found in anal sacs of beavers. It's used in soft and hard candies, chewing gum, gravies, baked goods, frozen dairy, meat products, alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, iced tea, pudding, gelatin and in the perfume industry for "fine leathery nuances." Carmine or Natural Red #4 is in pink foods like strawberry and raspberry yogurt and pop-tarts. It's made from crushed female cochineal beetles, who become red in color after fertilization and received a name change after an outcry from vegans who learned they were unknowingly eating bugs.

In the America that I love, we prefer to eat true natural foods, instead of disguised beetle and beaver parts. The only way to honestly know the "natural flavors" in your food product is to ask the company, but they often won't tell you. So, if you want a healthy apple-flavored snack, eat an apple.

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