

Beware: Misleading ingredient names explained



My general rule is to buy foods that list ingredients I can pronounce, but there are at least two things I additionally watch out for: ingredients that sound healthy but aren't (I try to avoid those) and obscure ingredients that sound scary but are basically harmless.

The latest ingredient to request a “healthier-sounding” name change? High-fructose corn syrup. This week, the Corn Refiners Association, which represents firms who make the product, petitioned the FDA to change the ingredient's name to “corn sugar.” The group has many reasons for wanting the change, including changing public perception of this controversial ingredient. But two respected nutrition watchdogs, EatingWell advisory board member Marion Nestle, a nutrition professor at New York University, and Michael Jacobsen, director of a Washington, D.C.-based nutrition and health advocacy group, Center for the Science in the Public Interest, told the New York Times that the new term “corn sugar” is a more accurate description for high-fructose corn syrup, which is a mixture of glucose and fructose.

I talked to EatingWell's nutrition editor, Brierley Wright, M.S., R.D., about HFCS and 4 more ingredients that sound healthier than they are, plus 4 obscure-sounding ingredients that are basically harmless. (Note: This is not a complete list, just some highlights to pay attention to.) Here's her advice on how to decode them:

Related: Is High-Fructose Corn Syrup Worse for You Than Sugar? Find Out Here.

Related: Yogurt & More: 6 healthy-sounding foods that really aren't

WATCH OUT: INGREDIENTS THAT ARE SCARIER THAN THEY SOUND

1. Fruit Juice Concentrates

- **What it is:** An alias for added sugars, which supply calories but little to no nutritional value. This also applies to: corn sweetener or syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, agave, invert sugar, malt sugar, molasses, syrup and sugar molecules ending in “ose” (dextrose, fructose, glucose, lactose, maltose, sucrose).
- **Why you should watch out:** Because high intakes of added sugars are linked with increased risks for high blood pressure and high triglyceride levels, risk factors for heart disease, The American Heart Association recommends limiting added sugars, advising that women eat no more than 100 calories per day from added sugars, or about 6 teaspoons, and men should stick to less than 150 calories, approximately 9 teaspoons. (A 12-ounce can of cola has about 8 teaspoons.) Added sugars in processed foods are difficult to track. "Sugars" on Nutrition Facts panels include added sugars and natural sugars found in healthful foods (fructose in fruits, lactose in dairy). In general, the closer added sugars are to the top of the list, the more the food contains.

2. Soybean Oil

- **What it is:** A plant-derived oil
- **Why you should watch out:** Soybean oil, along with corn oil, cottonseed oil, safflower oil and sunflower oil, is high in omega-6 fats, which compete in your body with healthy omega-3 fats (the kind that benefit your heart and brain). Many nutrition experts say that Americans get too many omega-6 fats in their diets, mostly from processed foods. Joe Hibbeln, M.D., a captain in the United States Public Health Service **takes it a step further and blames alcoholism, depression and a host of other illnesses on the excess of omega-6 fats in our diet.** In fact, it's quite difficult to find commercial salad dressings, mayonnaise, even crackers, breads, pasta sauces and granola bars, among other products, that don't include oils with high levels of omega-6 fats.

Click here for our recommendations for some of the healthiest packaged salad dressings, mayonnaise, crackers, pasta sauces and granola bars.

3. Palm Oil

- **What it is:** Oils derived from the fruits of palm trees.
- **Why you should watch out:** Now that the heart-damaging effects of trans fats (hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils) are widely known, many food manufacturers are replacing them with

palm oil. EatingWell's Dietitian and Nutrition Advisor Sylvia Geiger, M.S., R.D. reports that while palm oil is trans-fat-free, about half of its fat is saturated, adding about 1.5 grams sat fat to each 2-tablespoon serving. Have we traded one "bad fat" for another? Could be. While you may have heard that palm oil has less of a cholesterol-raising effect than other tropical oils, the research isn't conclusive. Your best bet is to choose natural products that contain neither added palm oil nor trans fats. (Note: Products labeled "0 trans fats" can still contain up to half a gram of trans fat per serving. You can assume that "trans-free" products still contain a small amount of trans fat if partially hydrogenated oil is listed as an ingredient.) In addition, recent research shows that palmitic acid, a saturated fat found in palm oil (and beef, butter and cheese) caused mice to become resistant to the appetite-suppressing hormones leptin and insulin, which in theory could make them eat more.

4. Wheat Flour

- **What it is:** Refined wheat flour, also a synonym for white or all-purpose flour.
- **Why you should watch out:** Wheat flour is different from "whole-wheat flour." Wheat/white flour contains barely any fiber, vitamins or minerals, the building blocks of healthy food. So you're missing out on all the benefits of whole grains. One slice of white bread has 65 percent less fiber, magnesium and potassium than whole-wheat bread. The bran alone in whole-wheat bread gives it 20 times more antioxidant power. A diet high in whole grains, on the other hand, is associated with a lower risk of heart disease, less weight gain, fewer cases of type 2 diabetes and reduced risk of colon cancer and metabolic syndrome. People who eat more whole grains also tend to have lower bad (LDL) cholesterol and higher good (HDL) cholesterol, all good reasons to opt for a chewier loaf and more foods made with whole grains.

Related: 3 Ways to Find the Healthiest Supermarket Breads

CHILL-OUT: SCARY-SOUNDING INGREDIENTS THAT ARE BASICALLY OK

1. Inulin

- **What it is:** Not to be confused with insulin, a hormone that regulates energy and glucose metabolism in the body, inulin is a soluble fiber found naturally in bananas, onions and some plants.

- **What it does:** It is added to processed foods to replace sugar, fat and flour. Bonus: It can help increase calcium absorption and can help promote the growth of beneficial bacteria added to yogurt.

2. Ascorbic Acid

- **What it is:** This is a pseudonym for vitamin C, a water-soluble vitamin perhaps best known for its role in boosting our immune system, it also helps the body absorb iron from plants we eat, acts as a protective antioxidant and has been linked with younger-looking skin.
- **What it does:** It is added to products to prevent discoloration; in bread-machine yeast it acts as a dough conditioner to promote volume.

3. Xanthan Gum

- **What it is:** You'll see this powdery substance, fermented from glucose, in a lot of products— from salad dressings to ice creams.
- **What it does:** It thickens salad dressings and maintains the smooth consistency of ice creams. Bonus: Increasing the viscosity of lower-fat dressings gives them the richer “mouthfeel” associated with full-fat versions—making it a little easier to reach for the healthier choices.

4. Maltodextrin

- **What it is:** This ingredient, along with vegetable gum and methylcellulose, is one of the starches or fibers derived from natural plants (including bushes, trees, seaweed) and bacteria.
- **What it does:** You'll find maltodextrin, or its pals, in nearly every processed food, including veggie burgers, in which they act as a binder and stabilizer to hold everything together in a neat, firm patty.