

At Issue:

Are ADHD and artificial food dyes linked?



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Without question, food dyes serve a very useful purpose for food manufacturers. They make a wide variety of low-nutrition junk foods — candy, soft drinks, sugary cereals — more appealing to children. Dyes can help disguise the absence of healthy fruit and vegetable ingredients in a product expected to include them, as was the case in a nearly avocado-free “guacamole” dip Kraft used to sell. But given that they provide no nutritive or preservative function, food dyes have quite a high bar to clear when it comes to their safety.

Thanks to numerous controlled studies conducted in the United States, Europe and Australia, we now know that Yellow 5, Red 40, Blue 2 and other petroleum-based food dyes have a powerfully disruptive impact on some children's behavior.

A comprehensive 2004 meta-analysis of the medical literature and two important studies funded by the British government found that dyes (and possibly the preservative sodium benzoate) adversely affect kids' behavior. These studies support what many parents who have placed their hyperactive children on a diet developed by allergist Benjamin Feingold have discovered: that eliminating foods with artificial dyes (and in other cases, other foods) leads to marked improvement in behavior and performance in school.

In 2008, the Center for Science in the Public Interest called on the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ban several dyes. At a follow-up 2011 hearing, the FDA agreed that dyes do adversely affect some children.

European food-safety officials are several steps ahead of the FDA and have successfully spurred positive changes in the industry. Thus, a strawberry sundae from a McDonald's in the U.K. gets its red color from strawberries; McDonald's treats its U.S. consumers to strawberries and Red 40.

As it happens, safe natural colorings are abundant. (No European consumers seem to miss the fake ones.) Getting rid of food dyes here would certainly be a safer step than dealing with hyperactivity or other behavioral problems in children with powerful stimulant drugs such as Ritalin. (Irony alert: Some Ritalin pills have Green 3.)

The question I pose to American food-safety regulators and companies is why tolerate any risk, even in just a small percentage of children, from something that serves only a cosmetic purpose in food?



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the scientific evidence does not support the claims made by the Center for Science in the Public Interest and others linking synthetic color additives and hyperactive behavior in children. Reviews of several studies on hyperactivity and synthetic food color conducted by U.S. experts and international regulatory bodies have found no correlation between the intake of synthetic food colors and hyperactivity among children.

Just last year, the FDA Food Advisory Committee, an expert panel of pediatricians, toxicologists, behavioral scientists, neuroscientists and food scientists, reviewed all of the available evidence and concluded there is no established causal relationship between color additives and hyperactivity in children. The committee voted against recommending additional labeling beyond the name of the color but agreed additional studies are warranted. The International Association of Color Manufacturers supports the committee's conclusions. We are currently conducting a study to further improve the understanding of color additive consumption, and the results will be shared with the FDA.

The color industry takes its responsibility for consumer safety seriously. In addition to complying with FDA regulations and procedures for certification of colors, the industry also sponsors many safety studies, the results of which have been evaluated by the FDA and international regulatory bodies, including the Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives and the European Food Safety Agency. The transparent safety-evaluation process includes commentary from all stakeholders, including regulators, consumers, public health advocates and industry. These studies confirm the safety of FDA-certified colors, and as a result, various coloring additives have been approved for use in food, beverages and other products around the world.

While they are not nutritional, color additives play an important role in food, and they do so without posing a health risk to consumers. Color is one of the principal contributors to the palatability of foods. Color additives enhance colors that occur naturally, correct natural variations in color and provide a colorful identity to foods that would otherwise be virtually colorless. Additionally, they provide a means to identify drugs and dietary supplements, helping to prevent medication errors.

Our industry is vigilant about the safety of our products, and we will continue to stay on top of new scientific developments related to color additive safety. We will continue to work closely with regulatory authorities around the world to ensure that food colors are safe.