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Food additives - are they safe?

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By Samantha Bandara

Have you ever stopped to consider that your day-to-day meals, particularly the packaged/processed food, contain varieties of added substances, which are made of synthetic chemicals? When you read the list of ingredients in the food labeling/packages, you can see different substances named with 'INS' or 'E' numbers, some of them you may have never heard of or some names are very hard to read. These substances are called 'Food Additives'.

More than any other time in history, people are conscious about 'food' they consume –

where they come from and how they are produced. Unlike in the past, when ancestors harvested their own food for consumption, most food consumed today comes from unknown sources and the food value chain is increasingly becoming modernized along with developments in science and technology. Together with structural changes — population growth, urbanization, and globalization—people's lifestyles and food habits have changed, accelerating demand for processed and convenient food. In this regard, 'food additives' play a key role in the food processing industry, making a variety of food available from every corner of the world.

Since prehistoric times, people have used spices and salt as ingredients for food preservation. In Sri Lanka, traditional techniques such as soaking in honey, salting, pickling, and smoking were found to be used to preserve and prepare vegetables, fruits and meat by Veddas, aborigines or indigenous people. The first patent for food additives was taken by the US in 1886 for a mixture of salt and calcium phosphate as a food condiment.

Are food additives essential?

Over the last 50 years, food additives have revolutionized the food industry, moving with advanced technology to cater to the increasing demand for convenient, tasty and nutritious foods as well as increasing overall demand for food with population increase.

Thousands of food additives made of synthetic chemicals introduced by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are now used by food industries all over the world. According to the book, *Staying Healthy Shopper's Guide: Feed Your Family Safely* by Elsom M. Haas, food industry commonly uses these substances to:

- * improve shelf life or storage time,
- * make food convenient and easy to prepare,
- * increase the nutritional value,
- * improve the flavour of foods,
- * enhance the attractiveness of food products and improve consumer acceptance.

Food additives can be categorized based on the purpose of each additive. Generally speaking, there are 6

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types of food additives; they are preservatives, nutritional additives,flavoring agents, coloring agents, texturizing agents, and miscellaneous additives.

Growing concerns in Sri Lanka

Despite the multiple purposes of additives, there are emerging 'hard facts' with regard to the use of food additives, which raise concerns.

One of the main concerns is the adverse reactions to food additives by individuals. To run a safety analysis for a range of dosages, each additive is fed to an animal. Thereafter, the FDA recommends the 'safe dosage' of each chemical substance for human use. Many studies have found harmful effects of over dosage of certain chemicals on animals. For instance, Monosodium Glutamate(MSG - INS 621 or E 621)popularly known as Ajinomoto, discovered by the Chinese and Japanese about 1,500 years ago, is used universally as a flavour enhancer. MSG is made up of two chemicals — sodium (salt) and glutamate. Glutamate or amino acid can also be found in natural food stuff such as mushrooms and tomatoes. It is said that 'MSG does not bring any nutritional value to the food, but stimulates taste buds by exciting the brain cells'. A study found that a large part of neurons in brains of infant mice can be destroyed by feeding large amounts of MSG. Research has also found other adverse effects of MSG on human health,including headache,facial pressure, chest pains, burning sensation, wheezing, and difficulty of breathing –a collection of symptoms often called "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome".

However, the use of this substance in food products in Sri Lanka is permitted under the regulation No. 1795/51 in the Food Act, No. 26 of 1980. Importation of MSG intothe country has seen an increase over the years. According to Custom data, Sri Lanka imported 1,772 tons of MSG worth Rs. 316 million in 2009 – these figures have increased to 2,740 tons of MSG and Rs.499 million by 2013.Like in many other countries,Sri Lankan consumer movementshavealso raised their voices demanding the authorities ban MSG, particularly in food preparations atschool canteens.However, no policy decision has been taken yet.

What needs to be done?

Another area of concern is that food additives in general accelerate attention-deficit disorder (ADA), and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).A study found that hyperactivity increased in 3-year-old and 8-9-yearold children who consumed juices containing artificial food colours and preservatives. In addition, additives are likely to lead to increase asthma among children.

It is important for countries to carry out regular 'dietary exposure assessments'to examine the harmful effects of food additives on human health.The results of such assessments can be used to spread awareness amongst people.It is well known that over-consumption of any food item can have an adverse effect. Likewise, eating food containing additives often and in large quantities may have health implications later in life. Therefore, it is advisable to avoid food that contains synthetic chemicals, as much as possible. Moreover, it is difficult to point out whetherthe reactions to additives are mild or severe. Therefore, those who suffer from allergies or food intolerances should carefully checkthe ingredients listed on labels.

As per the Food Act of 1980, proper labeling in food products is a must. However, listing the ingredients on labels is not adequate. It is important to list the quantity of each ingredient used, along with nutrition information.This will provide the necessary information for consumers about each ingredient, to help balance their daily food intake.

Another major issue is that packed/unpacked food items such as rice, kottu, hoppers, thosai, etc., prepared by food vendors do not contain labels to state the type of ingredients(e.g., salt, sugar, and other additives) andquantities used.As a result, consumers are not able to gauge the safety of such food. In Sri Lanka, there are frequent media reports of unsafe/unhygienic food items being sold by vendors for human consumption. This highlights that the availability of policies or regulations is not adequate.

While it is important to identify and take necessary action against those who violate such regulations, a number of measures are required to facilitate this process. These include recruiting adequate staff by relevant authorities (e.g., Public Health Staff),imposing high penalties within short periods in line with the law,providing adequate laboratory facilities for testing, etc.,which are essential for the proper implementation of regulations to ensure safety of food we consume.

Samanthi Bandara is a Research Officer at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). This article was written to coincide with the World Health Day 2015. To view the article online and comment, visit the IPS blog 'Talking Economics' – www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics)