Heaven Preserve Us

By Josh Bloom — May 12, 2016

As the farcical organic/back-to-nature movement continues to erode brains in this country, George Carlin's seven-word list needs to be updated. You know the first seven. I'm going to add the eighth: Preservatives.

So, how did we get to the point where, if a mother buys a cereal with a preservative in it, child protective services will be waiting outside the supermarket? Obviously, preservatives are artificial, and therefore bad for your health, and are thus something to avoid. Or are they?

Let's take a look at the most common preservatives and see what Whole Foods and those in the rest of the "organic universe" are scaring you about.
What is screamingly obvious is that of the nine common preservatives listed, eight are found in nature, and seven are already present in everyday foods or drinks. If you are eating berries that contain sorbic acid, it is hard to imagine why the addition of the same preservative to cheese is of any concern. The same holds true for benzoic acid/sodium benzoate (3).

In reality, this list doesn’t look all that bad. Yes, there are conflicting opinions about the carcinogenicity of BHA, but keep in mind that rodent models of cancer are notoriously bad for several reasons(1). Given this potential concern one might wonder why BHA is being used in place of BHT (2). That is, until you see note (2).
Allergic reactions to sulfites are a real concern, so those who are sensitive need to avoid sulfite preservatives, but also a variety of foods and wine that also contain the chemical.

Any discussion or analysis that focuses solely on risk rather than risk vs. benefit is automatically flawed. Preservatives are used in foods, drugs, and cosmetics for a reason — to keep you from getting sick.

The FDA, which is considered by many to be a risk-averse agency, has an online pamphlet [1] that discusses the risks and benefits of food preservatives. Some highlights include:

- "Preservatives slow product spoilage caused by mold, air, bacteria, fungi or yeast."
- "[Preservatives] help control contamination that can cause foodborne illness, including life-threatening botulism.
- [They prevent] fats and oils from becoming rancid ... [and] fruit from turning brown ...

Finally, let's recall the horrendous 2013 debacle at the New England Compounding Center, where massive incompetence [2] led to a fungal contamination of an injectable steroid. Sixty-four people died and 800 became ill. The practices at NECC were so awful that two company executives were charged with murder [3].

Despite the complete absence of any safety measures, the entire incident may never have occurred had a preservative been used. Nevertheless, some physicians prefer preservative-free injectable steroids because of concerns about neurological damage from the preservative — a fear that has been debunked [4].

In the end, the fear of preservatives, just like the fear of most chemicals, is created and exaggerated by individuals or groups that have an agenda — pushing the preposterous "organic movement" for its own benefit. Only, in this case, such a mentality doesn't just hurt your wallet.

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NOTES:

(1) Rats are frequently bred to develop tumors [5], so that either potential carcinogens or cancer drugs can be evaluated in a shorter period of time. There are two main problems involved: A -- the rats develop tumors so easily that the control group has them too, which makes the statistics questionable. And, B -- almost all of these experiments are done at doses that are so high, relative to the size of the animal, that whatever is going on has (at best) limited predictive value in humans.

(2) It is simply ridiculous that Vani Hari (aka "The Food Babe"), who may know less about chemistry than any other multi-celled organism in the solar system, got "big cereal" to yank BHT and replace it with BHA — the one preservative with a slight cancer risk. Ironic? Yes. Surprising? No way.

(3) One of the concerns about using sodium benzoate in drinks is that in the presence of vitamin C and trace of metal, that it can be converted to benzene — a known carcinogen. Companies are starting to switch to other preservatives. But this risk is overblown. According to Dr. Joe Schwarcz [6], the Director of McGill University’s Office for Science and Society, and award-winning chemist, you are getting a dose of benzene every day, like it or not: "When the U.S. Food and Drug
Administration carried out a survey of 70 foods over five years, benzene was found in every item except for American cheese and vanilla ice cream.”