

Spotting tartrazine in foods

Tartrazine, derived from coal tar, is a commonly used colour all over the world, mainly for yellow, but can also be used with Brilliant Blue FCF (FD&C Blue 1, E133) or Green S (E142) to produce various green shades. Used to give some foods a yellow colour, yellow dye number 5 is found in desserts and sweets, beverages, snacks and cereal.



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Some medications, such as vitamins and antacids, have tartrazine in them too, usually so that the type of medication can be identified through its colour. Tartrazine is not limited to food products and other items can contain the dye. These include household cleaning products, paper plates, pet foods, crayons, writing ink, stamp dyes, face paints and envelope glues.

Intolerance quite widespread

The dye seems to cause the most allergic and intolerance reactions of all the azo dyes, especially among consumers who suffer from aspirin intolerances and those who are asthmatic. It has side effects such as depression and can make hyperactive children more irritable.

Azo is the term given to synthetic, organic dyes that contain nitrogen and which make up between 60-70% of all dyes used in food manufacturing. Symptoms that people are insensitive to tartrazine can show up in a few minutes, or between 6-14 hours later. These can be from digesting the dye, or from cutaneous exposure through the skin.

According to registered dietician and author Celynn Erasmus, tartrazine has been shown to cause non-immunological food intolerance type reactions. The adverse reactions which have been reported include urticaria (allergic skin rash), rhinitis (runny nose), asthma, purpura (purplish skin bruising) and systemic anaphylaxis (shock). These symptoms may be exaggerated in susceptible children.

"The question of intolerance to tartrazine should be seen against a background of food intolerance, allergy and hypersensitivity in general. The incidence of intolerance to foods containing milk, wheat, rye and their derivatives, is very

much higher than intolerance to foods containing tartrazine and other food additives. In the same way as milk, wheat and rye products pose no threat to the vast majority of people, so tartrazine containing products are generally safe for the majority of the population. Those few who are intolerant are protected by South African food regulations which require that the tartrazine in a product must be declared by name on the label, in the list of ingredients," says Erasmus.

Cut it out

Some people are so sensitive, they experience issues even at small doses, says FoodSure MD, Amanda Rogaly. She adds this can persist for as long as three days after exposure.

Although there are studies that find either for, or against, tartrazine affecting hyper children and others showing that replacing the dye with another could also have adverse effects, the simplest solution is to cut it out, especially as it's not needed by our bodies, says Rogaly.

However, that this does not mean that parents can afford to be lax. She says there is no way of telling, just by looking at a person, whether they will be affected. "It's always better to play it safe with food."

Says Erasmus, "Although people often look for the ideal 'hypoallergenic diet', such a thing does not exist. What is 'hypoallergenic' for one person could be life threatening for another. Each person's inherited tendencies, previous medical history, lifestyle and response to both food and non-food factors (such as airborne and environmental allergens) will contribute to the way in which his or her body reacts to the 'foreign' foods and chemicals that enter it. It is always best to look for responsible, accountable food labelling and to work along with a registered dietician when changing or eliminating items from your diet."

Other names for tartrazine

Rogaly adds that there has to be a reason for a movement towards banning the dye, especially as those who are most likely to ingest it are children. "Children are not going to be reading labels and, even if they did, they wouldn't know what they are reading. It's our job as parents to make sure that what goes into their stomachs, feeding their bodies and brains, is made up out of the best possible ingredients," she says.

Rogaly adds that some products do not state that tartrazine is present, rather listing yellow dye number 5 in the ingredients. "The consumer is none the wiser, as they are looking out for the name, and many people have no idea that the two are the same thing."

Tartrazine is also known as E number E102, C.I. 19140, FD&C Yellow 5, Acid Yellow 23, Food Yellow 4, C.A.S No. 1934-21-0, hydrazine yellow, tartrazol yellow, Tartrazinum or Tartrazin.

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