

Are food additives slowly killing us?

by Mark Pavilons

We are what we eat, has been our catch phrase for generations.

And yes, what we put in our mouths and bellies is more important today than ever before.

Unfortunately, the list of additives on our food packages continues to grow, leaving us scratching our heads. These substances may also be making us sick, and ultimately shortening our lifespans.

According to an online study published by The BMJ earlier this year, convincing or highly suggestive evidence linked diets rich in ultra-processed foods with increased risks for premature death, cardiovascular disease, mental health disorders, diabetes, obesity, and sleep problems. Associations between ultra-processed foods and asthma, gastrointestinal disease, some cancers, and other health issues were limited, and need further investigation.

Some of the culprits, according to another study, are soft drinks, both diet and regular. And here some of us were led to believe zero sugar drinks were better for us. Refined grains in breads and baked goods are another enemy. Who knew bread could be so bad?

Processed meats (deli)?are also a no-no.

Additives include preservatives, emulsifiers, artificial colours and dyes, bleaching, gelling and glazing agents, added or altered sugar, salt and fats, all designed to make our food more appealing and appetizing.

Wow.

This isn't new and yet, I don't hear many alarm bells ringing from healthy eating advocates and government agencies.

I came across a very interesting social media post that compared several common food items from the 1980s with today.

Common popular bread varieties once contained only enriched wheat, flour, water, sugar, yeast, salt, milk and butter. The same loaf today contains more than 20 ingredients that include calcium propionate and calcium sulfate, ammonium sulfate, DATEM, high fructose corn syrup, and more.

Old school or perhaps even real French fries should only contain potatoes, beef tallow and salt. Yet, ingredients in this fast-food staple today include dextrose, sodium acid pyrophosphate.

For those peanut butter lovers, you were fine as a kid. But today's brands contain sugar and hydrogenated vegetable oils.

Common sports hydrating drinks once contained only water, sugar, potassium and lemon juice.

Today's consumers are getting dextrose, modified food starch, Red 40, glycerol ester of rosin, sodium citrate, monopotassium phosphate and more. Now that's bang for your buck!

Anyone could find thousands of examples of this today. And while ingredients are clearly labelled, along with nutrition facts, many consumers still roll merrily along, filling their temples with horrible, modern chemicals, all in the name of ?preserving profits.?

My wife has trained us all on reading all of the ingredients on packaging and we've been doing this for a few years now. I?am most shocked by the amount of added sugar and carbs in almost everything we digest.

She has told me my diet soft drinks were bad, but I figured since diabetes ran in my family, I should stick with these sugar-free alternatives. Has it been detrimental, and has it contributed to my prostate cancer? From what I understand, my type of cancer isn't directly tied to lifestyle, other than smoking and drinking alcohol.

According to University of Montreal professor Jean-Claude Moubarac (as quoted by CBC's The Nature of Things), "poor diet is a nutritional calamity." Half of the calories we consume daily come from these ultra-processed concoctions, which aren't really food at all.

Health Canada does publish national food guidelines, but how many of us have glanced at them?

They recommend the bulk of our diet consist of fruits and veggies, followed by protein foods and whole grain foods. Water should be everyone's drink of choice.

Whole grains include whole wheat, barley, wheat berries, quinoa, oats, brown rice. Fish, poultry, beans, and nuts are all healthy, versatile protein sources.

The problem transcends generations, and many younger people have become accustomed to diets of burgers, fries, pizza and instant noodles.

And, it's estimated that only 20% of Canadians cook every day at home.

That's sad.

I recall growing up in rural Caledon just north of Bolton. My mom had an expansive, 50-foot-long garden, nurturing everything from tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, lettuce, green beans, even strawberries and rhubarb. These were staples at our dinner table.

And I suppose that's the basis of the resurrected idea of the farm (or garden) to table idea. Not rocket science, just good, old-fashioned know-how.

When I look back, I now know just how important this diet was. And yes, I did eat my veggies. But I took it for granted, not really embracing the "good health" vibe. It wasn't really a thing in my youth, maybe because we were doing everything right - eating better, getting exercise and shouldering less stress. And of course, eating those home-cooked meals!

We're all aware of the cost of groceries these days. And eating well comes at a premium. But that shouldn't stop us from pursuing a healthier lifestyle.

We need to switch out the bad and introduce the good. Eat more home-made meals and avoid eating on the run and making bad choices out of convenience.

I realize it's all easier said than done. But every time you pick up a package of processed food, read the ingredients. It may just shock you into action.

Eat well and live well, everyone!