We enjoy a food supply that is safe, convenient, healthful, flavorful and affordable. Food ingredients – both those that have been used for centuries, as well as those developed more recently – help to make that possible.

**WHAT’S IN OUR FOOD:**
Understanding Common Food Ingredients

Food ingredients such as those found in the ingredient list on food labels are some of the most studied areas of the food supply. Food ingredients are carefully regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ensure that foods containing them are safe to eat and are accurately labeled.

Each food ingredient serves a function in our food supply. It may not always be obvious, but it is nevertheless important.

**Why Are Ingredients Added to Food?**

Food ingredients perform a variety of important functions in foods:

1. **To maintain or improve safety and freshness.** Preservatives help prevent spoilage and can significantly reduce the risk of foodborne illness.
2. **To improve taste.** Natural and artificial flavors, spices, and sweeteners can enhance the taste of foods that have been reformulated to contain less calories, fat, and sugar.
3. **To provide texture.** The addition of food ingredients such as leavening agents, emulsifiers, stabilizers, and thickeners give foods light, airy or smooth textures.

4. **To improve appearance.** Naturally colorless foods such as yogurts, cheeses, and juices, may be enhanced with natural and artificial food colors.

**Why do food ingredients sometimes have long names that are hard to pronounce?**

The FDA requires that the proper scientific term be used to identify food ingredients, even though they may be unfamiliar to consumers. The long “chemical” sounding names of ingredients are simply the scientific names, and are no different than other chemical compounds we are familiar with, such as sodium chloride (NaCl), which is table salt, and dihydrogen oxide (H2O, or water). Just like salt and water, many ingredients in foods are readily found in nature, including, fructose (found in fruits), steviol glycosides (also known as stevia, found in the stevia plant), and thiamine mononitrate (ordinary vitamin B1). Some food ingredients may also be associated with certain health benefits such as beta carotene, which is found in carrots. Approved and GRAS food ingredients have been confirmed by research and experts to be safe and effective for their intended uses. (See sidebar, What is GRAS?)

**Ingredients Commonly Found in Foods**

Many ingredients have been safely used in foods and beverages for decades and serve unique functions in foods. Without these ingredients, some foods may not be edible or meet consumers’ standards for healthfulness, freshness, taste, texture, cost, or appearance.

**What is GRAS?**

Food ingredients permitted for use in the U.S. fall into one of two main categories: Food and color additives or Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS) ingredients.

Both food additives and GRAS ingredients must be shown through scientific research to be safe and not to cause adverse health effects when consumed by the general public. Both must meet strict safety standards before being permitted for use in foods and beverages.

**GRAS ingredients must have:**

1) An established history of safe use and a significant number of people who consumed the ingredient prior to 1958 (when the GRAS law was passed); or
2) Scientific information about the safety and use of the ingredient that is widely known and publicly available and agreement among scientific experts that the ingredient is safe for its intended use.

A manufacturer may submit scientific research and other evidence that shows a food ingredient to be GRAS to FDA through a process called GRAS Notification. Although it is a voluntary process, all producers must ensure the safety of their ingredients, and FDA can choose to review or remove an ingredient from the food supply at any time, if it feels there is a safety or public health concern.

http://www.foodinsight.org
ANTI-CAKING AGENTS
For example: Calcium Silicate, Iron, Ammonium Citrate
Purpose: Absorb extra moisture; allow ingredients to mix easily so clumps do not form
Commonly found in: salt, baking powder, confectioner’s sugar

ARTIFICIAL & NATURAL FLAVORS
For example: Butter Flavoring, Vanilla Extract
Purpose: Add desired flavor
Other examples: salt, ascorbic and citric acid, vanillin, methyl salicylate (wintergreen)
Commonly found in: yogurts, cereals, breads, desserts, dressings, soft drinks
For example: Caffeine
Purpose: Provide a bitter flavor that neutralizes other sour and sweet flavors in beverages
Commonly found in: carbonated beverages, energy drinks; also found naturally in coffee, tea, cocoa and chocolate

DOUGH STRENGTHENERS AND CONDITIONERS
For example: Ammonium Sulfate
Purpose: Add stability to dough and prevent crumbling
Commonly found in: breads and other baked goods

EMULSIFIERS
For example: Soy Lecithin
Purpose: Enhance smooth texture; aid dissolving; prevent separation of ingredients
Other examples: cellulose, mono- and diglycerides
Commonly found in: dressings, peanut butter, chocolate, margarine, frozen desserts

ENZYMES
For example: Rennet (naturally found in cheese)
Purpose: Added to impact the rate of reactions between ingredients (ex. curdling milk to make cheese)
Other examples: lactase (naturally found in milk), papain (naturally found in papaya)
Commonly found in: cheese, dairy products, meat tenderizers

FATS & OILS
For example: Canola Oil, Soybean Oil
Purpose: Add taste, aroma and texture
Other examples: olive, corn, safflower, and sunflower oils; partially or fully hydrogenated oil; non-hydrogenated oil
Commonly found in: vegetable shortening, baked goods, margarine, peanut butter

FAT REPLACERS
For example: Modified Food Starch, Xanthan gum
Purpose: Provide creamy texture in reduced-fat foods
Other examples: alginate, carrageenan, polydextrose, Olestra
Commonly found in: baked goods, dressings, frozen desserts, candies, dessert mixes, dairy products, savory snacks

FLAVOR ENHANCERS
For example: Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)
Purpose: Enhance flavors of foods without imparting a separate flavor
Other examples: hydrolyzed soy protein, hydrolyzed vegetable protein
Commonly found in: soups, flavored rice, bouillon cubes, cured meats

FOOD COLORS
For example: Caramel Coloring, FD&C Yellow No. 5
Purpose: Offset color loss due to exposure to light, changes in temperature and/or storage conditions; enhance colors that occur naturally
Other examples: annatto extract, beta-carotene, FD&C Blue No. 1, Red No. 40
Commonly found in: beverages, candies, snack foods, yogurts, cheese, fruit spreads, pudding

LEAVENING AGENTS
For example: Sodium Bicarbonate (baking soda)
Purpose: Promote rising of baked goods
Other examples: calcium carbonate, yeast, baking powder
Commonly found in: breads and other baked goods

LOW-CALORIE SWEETENERS
For example: Aspartame, Stevia Leaf Extract, Sucralose
Purpose: Add sweetness to foods without adding significant calories
Other examples: acesulfame potassium (Ace-K), neotame, saccharin
Commonly found in: beverages, desserts, tabletop sweeteners, syrups, chewing gum, candies

POLYOLS (SUGAR ALCOHOLS)
For example: Erythritol, Mannitol, Xylitol
Purpose: Add sweet taste, body, and smooth texture
Other examples: sorbitol, maltitol, hydrogenated starch hydrolysates
Commonly found in: sugar-free candies, chewing gums, chocolate, ice cream, tabletop sweeteners

PRESERVATIVES
For example: Ascorbic Acid
Purpose: Maintain freshness and prevent or slow food spoilage
Other examples: nitrates, nitrites, butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), citric acid, hydrogenated oils, sodium benzoate
Commonly found in: beverages, dressings, baked goods, cured meats, oils, margarine, cheese, cereals

STABILIZERS, THICKENERS, BINDERS, AND TEXTURIZERS
For example: Carrageenan, Gelatin
Purpose: Produce uniform texture and maintain consistency in food
Other examples: cellulose, hydrogenated oils, xanthan gum, whey
Commonly found in: frozen desserts, dairy products, puddings and gelatin mixes, baked goods, sauces

SWEETENERS
For example: High Fructose Corn Syrup, Sucrose (table sugar)
Purpose: Add sweetness to foods and beverages while maintaining desired texture
Other examples: agave nectar, honey
Commonly found in: beverages, maple syrup, molasses, juice concentrates, cereals, desserts, dressings

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FOOD INGREDIENTS, USE YOUR DIGITAL PHONE TO SCAN THIS CODE

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Favorably Reviewed By:

American Academy of Nurse Practitioners
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