

Don't eat it if you can't pronounce it? Avoiding 'scary-sounding ingredients' won't make you healthier

“ If you can't pronounce it, don't eat it!" We are told that steering clear of scary-sounding ingredients is a simple, healthy way to eat and avoid potentially toxic chemicals. Is this correct? It's important now more than ever to understand how the food we put in our bodies can affect us. Let's discuss chemicals in our foods, clean eating, and how perpetuating unsubstantiated proverbs can be misleading and bolster unneeded fear in what is already an anxiety-ridden time.

I don't know about you, but our family has been trying to avoid the grocery store, and all other public outings for that matter, to maintain our social distance. So now, when I must head to the grocery store, I am thinking about a two-week grocery list to avoid repeated trips. Top of mind are items that will not only provide a bit of stability in my pantry, but are also healthy and affordable. As I enter the canned food aisle, I grab a soup and take a look at the nutrition label. My eyes widen... should I be afraid of all these ingredients I can't pronounce? The answer is not so black and white.

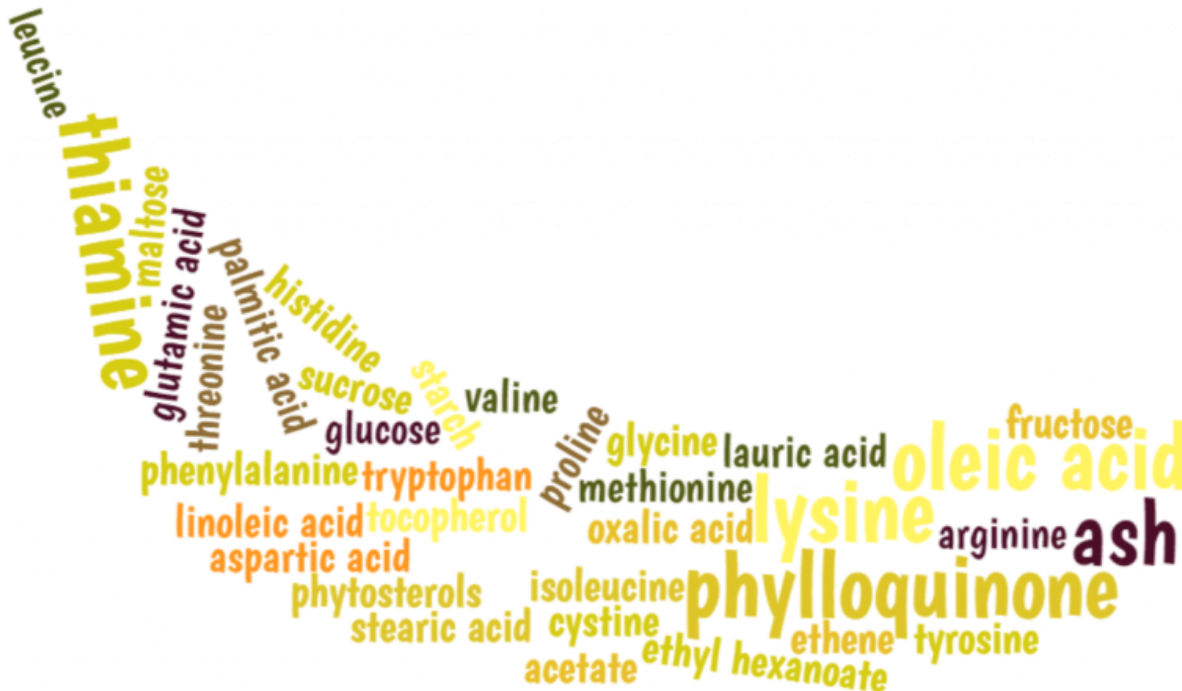
Let's take a look at this in a different way. Every morning, I throw some octadecenoic acid and hexadecenoic acid, along with arginine, aspartic acid, and phenylalanine onto the frying pan. When it's properly cooked, I put it on phosphorus, potassium, and manganese. It is delicious! What am I eating? Eggs over quinoa. A healthy, good-for-you breakfast with plenty of healthy fats, vitamins, and minerals.

Is a true measure of health the ability to pronounce a food's ingredients? The rhetoric, "If you can't pronounce it, don't eat it!" is adopted from a quote made by [Michael Pollan](#), the author of *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*. His intent was to warn consumers against eating highly-processed foods and provide guidelines to identify these products so we could combat growing health epidemics, like obesity, diabetes, and chronic inflammation.

Misrepresentation of "chemical"

Unfortunately, Pollan's statement was taken quite literally. Consumers began to question every multi-syllabic ingredient on their labels. But isn't that a little too simplistic? Let's get serious; most foods contain bad-for-you and good-for-you ingredients that are tongue twisters. Don't believe me? Try this: read the list

of ingredients below. It details the composition of a common breakfast and snack food.



Sound appetizing? Well, the truth is, these are simply the chemical ingredients for a banana. [James Kennedy](#), a high school chemistry teacher in Melbourne, Australia created this list to illustrate that even completely natural, wholesome, *clean* foods can sound potentially unhealthy and unnatural when the mechanism for determining health is solely based on pronouncing a food's chemicals.

"I want to erode the fear that many people have of chemicals".

– James Kennedy, Chemistry Teacher

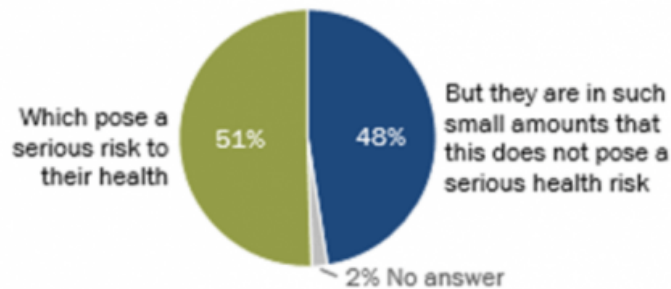
Our goal to eat healthier should include consuming nutrient-dense foods with low sodium, sugar, and trans & saturated fats. This means eating more fruits, veggies, and whole grains. Sounds pretty easy, right? Not always. Most of us tend to lean towards simple mantras to soothe our aversions to uncertainty and help us with quick decision making.

Perpetuating unreasonable food fears

According to [Mintel](#), 70% of consumers don't know what they need to eat to be healthy, [but over 51% of Americans](#) believe that additives in foods they eat pose a serious health risk. What causes this type of confusion and [food fear](#) of one of the safest food systems in the world? Misguided food dialogues may be to blame.

U.S. public is closely divided about overall health risk from food additives

% of U.S. adults who say the average person is exposed to additives in the food they eat every day ...



Source: Survey conducted April 23-May 6, 2018. "Public Perspectives on Food Risks"

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Pollan's words have fueled an unreasonable fear of chemicals, toxins, and additives – and ultimately a fear of our food systems' ability to ensure food safety. Unreliable food crusaders like the "Food Babe" have also adopted the phrase, "if you can't pronounce it, don't eat it", and continue to spread similar incorrect generalizations. And they ultimately exacerbate a problem that, for many, is just whether they can [afford to put food on their table](#).

Chemists like [Dorea Reeser](#) have spoken out against these misguided stigmas stating what seems to be the obvious:

"We are chemicals. Our friends are chemicals. Our babies are chemicals. The air we breathe is chemicals. The food we consume is chemicals that are digested by chemicals that turn into more chemicals."

So if you took Pollan's advice to the extreme, you would literally starve.

Do additives have a purpose?

In addition, reputable food scientist, Professor [Robert Gravani](#) of Cornell University, has been a leader in responsible food science to combat this faulty logic, as well.

“We want to enhance the quality and maintain the freshness of foods. We want to reduce waste. We really want to make more foods readily available to consumers. And when feeding 310 million people in the United States, we really need to think about how we can transport this food.”

– Prof. Robert Gravani, Cornell University

In the quote above from a [2012 interview](#) with National Public Radio's Talk of the Nation, Gravani details legitimate reasons food manufacturers add chemicals to food. He identifies a myriad of other meaningful ways additives have actually helped our food system.

For instance, our table salt contains iodine, a chemical that may make some consumers wary. However, the addition of this chemical has practically eliminated goiters, a medical condition affecting the thyroid gland. Moreover, niacin, a chemical added to bread, has all but made pellagra, a severe nutritional deficiency causing inflammation throughout the body, nonexistent.

Considering the trade-offs

Dr. Michael Holsapple and Heather Dover of the [Center for Research on Ingredient Safety](#) at Michigan State University explain that adding substances to food is a necessary, centuries-old practice. All ingredients serve a purpose, whether to add flavor, enhance appearance or texture, or preserve food against bacteria, mold, and fungi. They encourage consumers to do their research on their labels. Be informed, not scared.

“As toxicologists and food scientists, we believe that, by and large, food ingredients are safe. We encourage consumers to look at food labels, as they are an important source of information on the safety of that food, and they provide evidence to enable informed choices.”

– Dr. Michael Holsapple, Michigan State University

He went on to warn that: “You can choose to avoid foods with synthetic preservatives, like sodium benzoate or benzoic acid, but you may consequently increase the risk of you and your family being exposed to microbial pathogens because so-called ‘natural’ preservatives are not as effective.”

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Foods with “clean labels” and ingredients you can readily pronounce do not necessarily equate foods with healthier nutritional profiles. Should you be concerned about a particular ingredient, do some digging and

check into its applications to see if it's acceptable to you. The reality is that a healthy diet means making the right food choices, processed or not.

The bottom line

Science, chemistry, and nutrition are rarely as cut and dry as a simple mantra. Our suggestion instead is, if you can't pronounce it, look it up. Trust our extremely safe food system, not some adage you read in the latest health magazine. Next time you encounter an additive or chemical you can't pronounce, learn more about it and decide if you should avoid it or if you believe it is OK and serves a purpose in your diet.

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