

Hidden ingredients to watch for in prepared foods

“Being able to grab and go with prepared meals, like frozen lunches and packaged snacks can be very easy,” says Kayla Hansmann, a dietitian in Chicago. “Convenience is great, but what’s the long-term cost to your family’s health? A few extra minutes spent preparing fresh foods now can be less costly than the risks to your family’s future health.”

Hansmann says it’s especially easy to overlook possibly harmful ingredients in prepared foods, if you’re not reading the nutrition labels fully. She says there are four hidden ingredients you should look out for:

1. **Partially hydrogenated oils**—These oils may also be labeled as trans fats on the nutrition label, but the amount listed may be tricky because any amount of trans fat less than 0.5 grams can be reported as 0, so you may end up getting trans fats even if it says it contains 0. Hansmann suggests looking at the ingredient list and avoiding any hidden trans fats listed as “partially hydrogenated oils.”
2. **MSG and sodium**—Packaged foods often contain a great deal of sodium, as not only reported on the nutrition label, but in the ingredients list as MSG. Ethnic dishes can be particular sources of MSG, which is often used as a flavor enhancer. Other foods that may contain hidden sodium are lunch meats, cheeses, frozen pizzas and even fresh baked breads.
3. **Sodium nitrates/nitrites**—This hidden ingredient is often included as a food preservative, helping extend the life of a packaged food item. However, Hansmann says there is growing evidence that this preservative is linked to certain types of cancer.
4. **High fructose corn syrup**—This ingredient, is simply a fancy name for sugar and may be contributing to the growing diabetes epidemic in the U.S. Watch ingredient labels for anything ending in “-ose,” which are different forms of sugar. Look closely—there can often be three to four such ingredients in one food item.

Hansmann says, “Many chronic diseases are preventable with a proper diet. You just need to build in a little extra preparation time and make certain your family is getting a properly balanced diet. Making meal preparation fun by including family members can make it seem less of a chore and teach good nutrition, at the same time.”

Wishing you joy and good health,
Mary Bohlen RN
SJParishNurse@comcast.net