

Are Misleading Warnings to Blame for Avoided Ingredients?

Cornell Food & Brand Lab



Daily headlines on internet pages and blogs claim: "New ingredient X is harmful to your health." Such warnings can scare people into avoiding these ingredients without actually knowing the facts, leading some people to have food fears about ingredients such as sugar, fat, sodium, high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), mono sodium glutamate (MSG), and others. While some of these food fears are merited, others can be misleading.

A new Cornell University study published in Food Quality and Preference, investigated who might be most prone to food fears, why, and what can they do to correct misperceptions. The phone survey of 1008 US mothers investigated what they thought about the food ingredient HFCS. When comparing those who avoided HFCS with those who did not, the study uncovered three key findings about avoiders: 1) They were more likely to receive their information from the internet rather than TV, 2) they had a desire to have their food related choices known by their friends or reference groups, and 3) they were not willing to pay more for foods that instead contained regular table sugar when compared to peers who did not avoid HFCS.

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Researchers found that giving consumers more information about the ingredient such as its history can be effective in reducing ingredient fears. To arrive at this conclusion they asked participants to rate the healthfulness of Stevia, a natural sweetener. Half of the participants were given historical and contextual information to read about the product and the remaining participants were not given anything to read. Those who received information about an ingredient's history rated the product as healthier than those who did not. Lead author Brian Wansink recommends, "To overcome food ingredient fears, learn the science, history, and the process of how the ingredient is made, and you'll be a smarter, savvier consumer."

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