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The Clean Movement: Growing Consumer Awareness and Intolerance for Questionable Chemicals in U.S. Food and Products

A growing consumer awareness and an intolerance for questionable chemicals in food and products, otherwise known as the ‘clean movement’, has been picking up speed in the U.S. over the past few years and it is shaping more than just perceptions. Among the changes this movement for more transparency from food manufacturers, less additives, and safer chemicals in general, has spurred include a spike in organic food and product sales, reactions from Big Food manufacturers to (1) purchase existing organic food/product businesses and/or begin their own organic product lines; (2) label foods as “natural” that are anything but; (3) change their recipes for highly processed foods, removing some synthetic ingredients—and put out press releases to the mainstream media announcing said changes, a new trend from fast food giants to change their recipes to remove chemicals of concern from some of their food offerings, an increase in lawsuits against mainstream food and product manufacturers for false labeling claims, an increase in the number of tort cases against product manufacturers for liability of harm, and subsequently an increase in juries finding said manufacturers

responsible for said harm, an increase in television advertisements by food and product manufacturers that call attention to various offerings as being free of unwanted chemicals, an increase of Internet websites, blogs and commentaries on the topic of chemical-free foods and products, and an increase of ordinary citizens one might least suspect becoming activists for cleaner, safer chemicals in foods and products, to name a few.

While it may seem to some that this was a movement that seemed to happen overnight, the fact is that many professionals and advocates have been beating the drum and actively working to get the word out to consumers about the potential dangers of synthetic and industrialized additives in food, cosmetics, personal care and household products for many years now—in some cases for several decades. Back in the early days of the 1980's, researchers, journalists, scientists, attorneys, nonprofit advocates, healthcare providers, and others who were involved in public education efforts to get the word out to consumers about the potential dangers of chemicals of concern in food and products were relegated to the position of “fringe” and were ridiculed, or worse—ignored, accordingly.

Fortunately, convincing people to read ingredients labels, educate themselves, and avoid potentially deleterious food and product additives is no longer the arduous task it once was. This is because consumer awareness about chemical additives and the food and product safety movement has turned a corner in the past few years (a 2011 Reuters poll indicated that 58 percent of consumers preferred organic to conventional foods if given the choice and 63 percent of consumers under 35 years old chose organic whenever possible). Thanks in large part to the Internet and the ability to communicate and share information with large numbers of people effortlessly, there is an ever-growing number of food and product safety advocates, nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, public institutes, online groups and forums, bloggers and activists speaking out publicly about the potential dangers of synthetic and industrialized food chemicals and questionable additives in personal care products intended for adults and children, cosmetics and household products, and calling on Corporate America to remove

them. No longer seen as the “fringe element”, those working to get the word out about chemicals of concern in the food supply and products include professionals from every walk of life—researchers, scientists, physicians, attorneys, prominent business people, chefs, documentary filmmakers, university faculty, writers, musicians, and professional athletes, as well as everyday people from the mainstream, ranging from high school and college students to senior citizens—with some of the most active and vocal among them being mothers and mothers-to-be. It is these mom-activists who are perhaps the most impressive. They are also the group who tend to garner the most attention from Big Food corporations and big product manufacturers, and for good reason. Mom-activists tend to be relentlessly determined, highly vocal, and due to the multiple networks associated with rearing children they belong to, have a sizable audience for which to broadcast their message. And a couple of other important factors are at play with this group as well: they are frequently the primary deciders in the family for which foods and products will and will not be purchased, and, like their youth activist counterparts, the mainstream media perceives limited negative fallout in reporting on their campaigns.

According to an October 2014 online survey about food safety and genetically modified foods: “Ninety-four percent of respondents had at least some concerns about pesticide residues in food, 93 percent were concerned about bacteria, 91 percent had similar concerns about antibiotics, 90 percent worried about food additives, and 88 percent were concerned about preservatives.”

~University of Florida’s Public Issues in Education Center (PIE) Survey

From consumer awareness to a socio-economic movement

One of the most exciting changes to come out of the growing consumer awareness about potentially problematic food additives has been the consumer uprising element. Again, thanks to the Internet providing forums for effortless and effective communication with many, many people, we have witnessed ordinary, everyday consumers not only engaged in educating themselves and spreading the word and sounding off in petitions and emails to food manufacturers and fast food establishments, but who are actively voting with their dollars. In 2012, organic food sales in the United States generated approximately 31.32 billion U.S. dollars and is predicted to generate about 42 billion U.S. dollars in 2014.

And, while the FDA has seemingly gone mute on the topic, Big Food is noticing. Not only have the major food corporations moved in on the profitable opportunities resulting from increasing consumer demand for organic foods that are usually free of many of the problematic synthetic additives of their non-organic counterparts by buying up existing popular organic brands or creating their own lines (major food corporations such as White Wave Foods and General Mills have acquired multiple organic food companies and producers over the years, giving them a sizeable slice of the organic market share), but in order to remain competitive in the marketplace, they have also begun to comply with consumer demands for cleaner, more natural ingredients in their food—or at least to present the illusion of such.

Recent times have seen a dramatic increase in food manufacturer prime time television advertisements, print and online marketing, and product labels claiming their processed foods are ‘all natural’ and free of everything from growth hormones to pesticides to chemical additives. Sometimes these claims are accurate (more on this in a moment), but far too many times in recent years the claims of “all natural” on product labels for anything from toaster pastries to snack chips borders on the absurd. While the abuse by food manufacturers of “all natural” claims have resulted in numerous lawsuits and settlements, so many in fact that a number of food corporations have recently begun to

quietly remove the “natural” claims from their food labels, the point here is that Big Food manufacturers *are* hearing consumer messages and demands for clean, healthy food free of unwanted additives—so much so that when they are unwilling to comply with making actual changes to their products, the pressure is great enough as to cause them to resort to deception.

*“A growing number of food and drink companies
including PepsiCo and Campbell Soup
are quietly removing “all natural” claims from packages.”
The reason?
“Lawsuits are piling up alleging false advertising.”
~Wall Street Journal*

Big Food’s genuine efforts to replace chemicals of concern in processed foods with safer additives

Criticized by food safety advocates and organizations for offering up processed foods filled with questionable synthetic and industrialized food additives to U.S. consumers while the very same products they sell overseas contain cleaner, safer food chemicals, according to insider reports and press releases some Big Food manufacturers have begun the protracted process of cleaning up processed food items sold in North American grocery stores. The process of reducing and replacing chemicals of concern with safer additives has begun in processed foods such as candies, ice cream, breakfast cereals, and boxed meals from some of the largest food manufacturers. Additives to be removed in selected items include questionable food dyes such as Yellow 5 (Tartrazine), Yellow 6, and Red 3 and 40, emulsifiers, anti-caking agents, antimicrobials, antioxidants, thickening agents, flavor enhancers and some of the most problematic preservatives such as EDTA and TBHQ.

Due to existing long-term contracts with suppliers, the need to establish often complicated contracts with new suppliers as well as the need to change logistics such retooling the manufacturing process and delivery, this changeover to cleaner, safer additives is often a long one. But we are encouraged by the commitment some Big Food manufacturers have already made to replace questionable chemicals of concern from selected items and can only hope that they continue their R&D efforts to replace potentially harmful additives from even more food items in the future.

The entire landscape is starting to change

It's not just the processed food companies noticing and responding to consumer pressure about food additives. Fast food companies are making changes as well. Corporate press releases to the mainstream media about decisions to remove various additives, something that was unheard of over the past twenty-five years or so, are now common place. Of course, there is much ado about the decision to remove one potential dangerous food additive, while upwards of 13 or more chemicals of concern remaining in the food go unnoticed, but that is another matter. The point is that the landscape is changing, a growing number of consumers of all ages, not just Millennials, now have an awareness of the potential for adverse health consequences from some synthetic and industrialized food chemicals and as a result are choosing additive-free and organic foods, and according to a recent study, the number of people in all age groups who are reading ingredients labels before choosing to purchase is at an all-time high. The idea that we only have one body and that the savvy thing to do is to take care of it *before* there are problems has begun to take hold. Equally prevalent in mainstream culture now is the growing understanding that what we eat (as well as what we breathe and touch) can have a profound impact on the body's ability to stay healthy—and this includes the synthetic and industrialized

chemicals in our food, personal care products, clothing, linens, household products and general environment. People are now starting to appreciate that the cleaner our diets and the more we can minimize and avoid exposure to these chemicals, the stronger and more effective our immune systems will be to respond to the threats we have little hope of avoiding.

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