

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL



## ‘Natural’ deli meats may not be as healthy as you think

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Bacon, hot dogs, deli meats and other processed meats have long been considered guilty-pleasure foods that contain unhealthy preservatives, additives and any number of chemical ingredients. Now, food companies are trying to change that image by creating “natural” lines of processed meat products from real ingredients with no added preservatives. But consumers who look beyond the label may be surprised at what they find in these “natural” meats.

A commercial for the Schneiders Country Naturals line asks: “What if natural ingredients were a promise, not a slogan?” It says the processed meats are “made with natural ingredients and no artificial additives or preservatives.”

Maple Leaf Foods uses a boy named Dylan Carter in a commercial for its Natural Selections brand. A butcher explains in a voiceover that Dylan’s parents wouldn’t let him eat hot dogs because of added preservatives, so the company made one with “no artificial preservatives and ingredients his parents can actually pronounce.”

The promises tap into the mindset of consumers looking to avoid artificial ingredients with complex names such as sodium erythorbate. For this reason, many are willing to pay higher prices for “natural” processed meats.

But the ads and packages for these new meat products don’t mention that they contain cultured celery extract, which is a source of nitrates and nitrites – preserving agents linked to an increased risk of heart disease, cancer and Type 2 diabetes.

Food and health experts say promoting “natural” processed meats as being free of unwanted preservatives is disingenuous, and could even do harm to certain populations, such as children and pregnant women, who are told to avoid consumption of nitrates and nitrites.

“I think that it’s misleading,” said Rosie Schwartz, a Toronto-based dietitian, author and advocate on a variety of nutrition issues. “I think we’ve been hoodwinked by the term natural.”

Dallas Rocheleau, a mother who lives in London, Ont., purchased some of the new meat products, but became suspicious when she saw “cultured celery extract” in the ingredient list. After investigating, she found that the substance is a source of nitrates and nitrites.

“I think it’s terrible,” she said. “People, they don’t realize they’re actually being taken by these companies.”

Frustrated consumers, such as Melanie Jones-Njoku, are taking food makers to task for what they see as misleading advertising.

“I feel cheated,” Ms. Jones-Njoku wrote on the Facebook page for Schneiders, which is owned by Maple Leaf Foods. “And to find this out while I have been eating [these processed meats] while pregnant just upsets me more.”

Nitrates and nitrites are similar compounds that are used to cure meat. They help retain a pink colour, create a distinct flavour and prevent growth of clostridium botulinum bacteria, which can cause botulism.

When nitrates are added to meats, they slowly break down into nitrites. Many health experts are concerned about nitrites in processed food because they can lead to the formation of nitrosamines, which have been linked to cancer.

For this reason, the federal government restricts the use of nitrates and nitrites in food.

But careful wording in ads and product packages allows food makers to avoid disclosing that “natural” meats contain a preservative many consumers are trying to avoid.

In Canada, foods cannot be labelled “natural” if they contain nitrates or nitrites, which means that cured products cannot be called natural. But if companies use naturally sourced ingredients, such as cultured celery extract, they are allowed to label them as being made with “natural ingredients,” even if the product contains nitrates or nitrites.

Andrew Pollock, senior vice-president of marketing for Maple Leaf Consumer Foods, said consumers understand processed meats need to be preserved and that cultured celery extract is a natural ingredient.

“We’re being quite forthright about what’s in the product,” he said. “We want to be very proud of what we’re declaring to the consumer.”

When nitrates are found naturally in vegetables, the presence of vitamins prevents their transformation into potentially risky nitrites. Research shows that eating vegetables guards against disease.

The same is not true for nitrates and nitrites used as preservatives in meat, regardless of whether they are labelled as “naturally occurring,” food experts say.

“It’s misleading,” said Keith Warriner, associate professor in food microbiology at the University of Guelph. “They’re both the same.”

A study published earlier this year in the Journal of Food Protection found that “natural” hot dogs had up to 10 times the nitrites of traditional hot dogs. An investigation by Consumer Reports magazine found nitrates and nitrites in natural and traditional hot dogs are similar.

Even if it were possible to produce processed meats without nitrites or nitrates, they still contain high amounts of fat and sodium and nutritionists say they should be consumed in moderation.

“These are not particularly nutritious foods, but they’re cheap to produce and they taste good and they’re widely promoted by manufacturers,” said Joe Schwarcz, director of the McGill University Office for Science and Society. “What is marketing all about? It’s the attempt to make your product look better than what it really is.”