Dyeing to Know

Does synthetic food coloring drive kids wild?

June 1, 2011 By Gerrie E. Summers

Recently, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) held hearings to explore food color additive regulations. Why? Because the agency wanted to review relevant evidence that these additives might trigger behavioral changes in children.

In 2008, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a watchdog group, urged the FDA to ban eight widely used certified color additives on the agency's approved list. The center said research showed these additives were linked to children developing behavioral problems such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The safety of synthetic food colorants has been a controversial topic for years. In 1973 allergist Benjamin Feingold, MD, found that removing artificial food dyes and preservatives from kids' diets improved their ADHD symptoms.

After Feingold's study, the FDA agreed that a small number of preschool children could be sensitive to tartrazine (FD&C Yellow No. 5). Since then, the FDA has been watching these color-producing chemicals for possible ill effects on kids.

But why are food colorings used? To correct color loss due to light exposure and other conditions and to give colorless food, well, color. (Think green mint ice cream and red cherry-flavored candy.)

The thing is, it's hard to prove that food colorings cause behavioral changes in kids. Study results remain inconclusive and inconsistent, and researchers say it's hard to objectively measure a child's hyperactivity.

For now, the FDA won't ban these additives, or even require warning labels on foods that include them. But some docs believe certain children may be especially sensitive to food colorings.

What to do? Simply monitor your children's diet and limit their intake of foods with color additives.