

Food coloring and ADHD -- no known link, but wider safety issues remain: researcher

June 14 2011



Testifying before an FDA panel on food dyes raised questions for psychologist Andrea Chronis-Tuscano. Credit: UMD

When University of Maryland psychologist Andrea Chronis-Tuscano testified before a U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) hearing last March, it changed her mind about possible risks of artificial food coloring for children, and drove her to look more closely at the products in her own pantry that she feeds her kids.

Chronis-Tuscano walked in to the meeting certain that NO convincing scientific evidence supports the idea that food coloring additives cause

Attention-Deficit/[Hyperactivity](#) Disorder, or ADHD - nor that strict diets eliminating dyes effectively treat the condition.

While the testimony from other experts did NOT shake that assessment, it did raise concerns for her about the lack of research on the overall safety of [food dyes](#) for children.

"The testimony I heard presents significant questions for me - issues that have not been adequately studied by scientists," says Chronis-Tuscano, a mother of young children, an associate professor of psychology and director of the University of Maryland ADHD Program.

"Beginning in the [womb](#), developing brains are particularly sensitive to toxins," Chronis-Tuscano explains. "It's important to get better information about how much of these substances American children consume, and whether these levels are dangerous.

"Given the lack of hard evidence, I am not convinced that food coloring additives are dangerous, but I am also not convinced that they are not. It is certainly possible that some small subset of children have a unique sensitivity to these substances.

"The issue shouldn't end here. We need better answers about the effects of these additives on our nation's children," she concludes.

The debate over a possible link between food additives and a range of childhood behavioral issues, such as ADHD, has persisted for decades, spurred on by parents' desire to find a remedy that does not involve powerful medications.

"This debate has itself been colored by weak science and strong emotional beliefs," Chronis-Tuscano says.

"My concern as a clinician is that the belief held by many parents that diets eliminating all food additives can cure [ADHD](#) often delays or prevents them from getting treatments for their children that are backed by strong scientific evidence - behavior therapy, stimulant medication, or their combination. The earlier such treatment begins the better. Going down the wrong path wastes resources and, most critically, precious time in the life of a child."

Yet, Chronis-Tuscano says she learned three things through her participation in the FDA hearing that "concern me both as a scientist and parent of two young children."

- Food coloring is overrepresented in products designed to be attractive to children;
- FDA has no specific data on food coloring consumption for particular subgroups in the U.S., including children;
- Committee experts pointed out that appropriate toxicology studies have not been conducted to determine the effects of these additives on developing brains at different ages.

"Despite the limited science, the UK and other European nations have required manufacturers to include warning labels - a step that may discourage the use of these additives in foods, especially those intended for children. After all, these dyes are purely aesthetic and can be replaced by natural coloring," Chronis-Tuscano notes.

"Even if the evidence does not currently warrant FDA action, parents and consumers can still act," she concludes.

"Although I have no plans to put my family on any type of elimination

diet, since my experience on the panel, I've become more attuned to food labels. Interestingly, more than 90 percent of the food coloring I found in my own pantry was in my children's vitamins, medication, and toothpaste.

"A more comprehensive scientific answer to the effects of food coloring additives on U.S. [children](#) is needed. Keep this issue on the nation's public health agenda," Chronis-Tuscano urges.

More information: More of her thoughts online:
newsdesk.umd.edu/vibrant/chronis_additives.cfm

Provided by University of Maryland

Citation: Food coloring and ADHD -- no known link, but wider safety issues remain: researcher (2011, June 14) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-06-food-adhd-link-wider.html>

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