

FOOD INTOLERANCE NETWORK FACTSHEET

Sorbates (preservatives 200-203)

This factsheet is intended for people who are already following a diet that is free of additives and low in salicylates, amines and flavour enhancers (failsafe).

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Introduction: Increasing use of sorbates (preservatives 200-203)

Until recently, sorbates didn't bother failsafers because they weren't in any foods we could eat. However, if you read labels regularly, you will have noticed that sorbate preservatives are creeping into all kinds of foods, mostly as sorbic acid (200) and potassium sorbate (202).

Are sorbates natural?

Sorbic acid and potassium sorbate are used in a number of foods describing themselves as 'natural'. Although sorbates occur naturally in some fruits, for commercial use they are manufactured synthetically, so it is misleading to describe them as 'natural'. They are one of the five groups of preservatives listed in the RPA Elimination Diet to be avoided, along with benzoates, sulphites, nitrates/nitrites and propionates.

Adverse reactions to sorbates

Sorbates have been associated with asthma, eczema, contact dermatitis, eye irritation, nasal irritation and burning mouth syndrome (in medical journals, see below) and the full range of food intolerance reactions including irritable bowel symptoms and children's behaviour problems.

Are you sensitive to sorbates?

If you have never done a sorbate challenge, you could follow the RPA rules for challenge: wait for 3 symptom free days in a row, eat 100 grams per day of preserved cottage cheese or similar every day for a week or until you see a reaction, while keeping a food and symptom diary. We would love to hear about your reaction to sorbates (which product, which symptoms; to suedengate@ozemail.com.au).

Products that would failsafe except for sorbates include:

- Philadelphia Cream Cheese (in tubs)
- Plain cottage cheese (with sorbate preservative)
- Reduced fat spreads (read label carefully for other additives)
- Queen brand Writing Icing with natural colours and flavours (seemingly all natural)
- Woolworths fresh pikelets
- Golden Pikelet Bites, Pikelets and pancakes
- Mr Lee's Kitchen Fresh rice noodles
- Double Merino Brand Shanghai Wonton skins (wheat flour, water, salt, 202)
- Double Merino Brand Gow gee pastry (same ingredients as above)

Other foods that may contain sorbates:

- Bread (e.g. Tip Top Muffins, also contain vinegar)
- Flat breads and tortillas (e.g. Old El Paso, also contain other preservatives)
- Bakery products such as cakes, pikelets, pancakes, waffles
- Flour products such as fresh pasta and noodles
- Cheese, Cream cheese, cottage cheese, cheese slices, cheese sticks
- Reduced fat cheeses and spreads
- Yoghurts
- Drinks including fruit juices, cordial, brewed soft drinks, wine
- Fruit syrups, preserved figs, cherries
- Margarines, spreads and dips

Pharmaceuticals and toiletries

Sorbates are also widely used in pharmaceuticals including tablets, syrups, eye, ear and nose drops, contact lens solutions; lotions and cosmetics; dermatitis or other local irritation caused by these products is well documented

Reader Reports

[572] The Great Philly Incident (August 2007)

Over the course of a couple of weeks in September 2006, our daughter became progressively more lethargic, withdrawn and emotionally fragile (cried easily for no particular reason). She was getting upset quickly in a teary way and blowing things out of proportion. After the holidays her teacher commented she thought it was unusual for Lucy to be so lethargic, quiet, teary, keeping to herself and not playing, not interacting. As an example, the teacher had asked all the kids to pack away the books. Normally Lucy would do this fairly promptly but she just sat there mesmerised in her own little world and didn't appear to hear the teacher. The teacher came over to her after all the other kids had left the area of the classroom and said gently to her 'Lucy it's time to pack away now please.' Lucy just dissolved into tears and it took a while for her to regain composure. The teacher said it was very out of the ordinary for Lucy who was usually full of energy, vibrant, bubbly, friendly and always very, very happy.

That night, after ruling out illness, and with much careful consideration and dissection of her diet and environment, I discovered from Sue's website that Kraft had introduced preservatives (sorbic acid, 200) in the tubs of Philadelphia Cream Cheese tubs. Lucy eats this on a daily basis on her sandwiches and sometimes as a dip as she had done for years. I rang Kraft and they informed me that they had only just started putting this ingredient in a couple of months earlier. After checking old containers I figured that she had consumed at least two tubs. The change in her demeanour had been gradual but still clearly noticeable by us as well as her teachers as this was not the Lucy we knew. Once we switched to the preservative free Philly blocks, she became 'better' within a few days and had returned to her usual energetic, happy, amenable self within a week. I now check labels every time, even if it is something I have bought many times before. – by email

[801] Potassium sorbate makes my son clingy, crying (June 2009)

I have a 6 year old son who I already knew was intolerant to some foods. He has periods of eczema (which we have been able to control with his diet) and we have avoided these things for years. Luckily, because he was basically born with eczema, I had been very careful about introducing foods. I started giving him crumpets for breakfast when he was 2. He would be fine after eating them, however when he woke from his sleep he would be screaming and hitting me, very violent and uncontrollable. I initially thought it was hunger, as I found that when I gave him something to eat he would calm down. Anyway, to cut a long story short. I found out about preservative 282 and cut it out completely. He was normal again!!

On and off over the years I discovered other things that affected him, so I added those to my list of things to avoid. A few months ago we went over to Europe. When we came back he went back to school and started getting very clingy, crying and not being able to read or write properly and was not able to concentrate. I have had trouble with these symptoms on and off over the 1½ years. I mentioned this to my friend, she gave me your book and I started an additive free diet. After about 1 week everything had improved dramatically. I waited about 4 weeks before I introduced additives, one a time ... He reacted to 202 (potassium sorbate) in a drink of juice by crying and becoming clingy. He had it at dinner time, then had trouble getting to sleep. The next day he was very sensitive and cried a lot and hid in his room when our visitors arrived and would not come out until they had been there for several hours. He got better after he had his lunch (which he ate by himself in his room). He then came out, but didn't talk much and sat right next to me. He only had it the once, as I did not want to make the situation worse. He can drink fresh juice with no problem. - Michelle by email

[800] 200, 160b, 320: these "no-no's" cause cramping and diarrhea (June 2009)

I am a 43 mother and have done the RPA elim diet. I have Colitis that was triggered by a single episode of food poisoning ten years ago. It took a long time to get a diagnosis of microscopic colitis. For a long time I was told that it was irritable bowel. Finally a colonoscopy and biopsy showed it - a very under-diagnosed condition. My big 3 "no-no's" are: annatto 160b, synthetic antioxidants such as BHA 320, and sorbates. All of those cause cramping and diarrhoea. – Kate, by email

[797] Behaviour and night terror induced by potassium sorbate (202) in Panamax (June 2009)

When my son had a nasty chest infection/bronchitis I gave him crushed up Panamax paracetamol 4-hourly for a couple of days, as well as the inners of amoxil capsules.

A couple of days later, his behaviour was absolutely shocking and it culminated in him having a night terror one evening, the most severe one he has had since being failsafe since last September.

I knew something was going on, and I decided to check up about Panamax – and discovered it has potassium sorbate (202) in it. We have not yet done any challenges on additives as we already avoid dairy and salicylates, so decided to pretty much stay additive-free. However, we do seem to be okay with moderate amounts of pure MSG and amines.

I strongly suspect that his behaviour and night terror were induced by the preservative 202. What angers me more is that I was completely unaware of the existence of the preservative in this product, due to the lack of these medicine companies having to label their products. Our kids are already sick when we need to give these drugs to them, and they need to get better, but how can they when their body is also trying to fight against an artificial preservative?

Even when I asked at the chemist for a preservative-free paracetamol, they were not able to tell me what was in the products they sold. If only we could have good information about what is in these medical items, ie. through labelling. I don't accept the excuse that there isn't enough room on the packaging – if a box of soap can list its numerous chemical ingredients, so should a box of pain relief or any other medicine.

Please use our experience in your endeavours to fight for better information labelling on medicines – it's our kid's future. – Joanne, Vic

Update: this reader was using an old box of Panamax. The formulation hasn't changed but the labelling has: Panamax boxes now list potassium sorbate on the label. For young children, ask for our recipe for additive-free children's paracetamol. (We would like to hear any other reports of reactions to sorbates – email suedengate@ozemail.com.au)

[864] 200: Severe contact dermatitis reaction to sorbates (200-203) (November 2009)

My son is now almost 4. He has always eaten happily from a wide range of food groups. We generally try to avoid feeding him (much) processed food, but since we travel a lot, it is inevitable that we also eat on the run. He was just under 12 months when he had his first reaction - to eating cream cheese. The effect was instantaneous and obvious: raised, red rashes on mouth, face, fingers, belly - anywhere that the food made contact. Other common allergens (like dairy, wheat, soy, nuts) clearly were no problem, so it only took another couple of incidents for us to figure out preservative 202 was the culprit. Since then we have mostly been able to avoid it, but it does crop up when we're not expecting it: like in some yoghurts (in NZ), margarines and so-called some 100% orange juices (the 100% claim is on the front of the bottle, but preservative 202 is listed in the ingredients). Again, the reaction is obvious - and although it causes some discomfort, the reaction doesn't seem to pose any obvious health risk.

As an aside, after spending some time this evening trying to research 202 allergies on the internet, I am surprised how very little information is available on it. Your website was one of the few to contain any information. Thanks for the tips about sorbates being also present in pharmaceutical products, since I had no idea about this. – Kate, by email (It is illegal to say 100% juice if there is a listed preservative! The ACCC has prosecuted several companies over that, see <http://www.accc.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/343977>. If you'd like me to act on it, let me know the name of the company. It is only through consumer complaints that change will occur.- S)

References and further reading

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More information

For symptoms of food intolerance, we recommend a trial of the RPAH elimination diet - free of additives, low in salicylates, amines and flavour enhancers, and with optional removal of dairy foods and wheat or gluten, depending on severity of symptoms - preferably supervised by a dietitian. Write to confoodnet@ozemail.com.au for our list of supportive dietitians, and see [Failsafe Eating](#).

www.fedup.com.au

Thanks to Kathleen Daalmeyer for the supermarket research.

The information given is not intended as medical advice. Always consult with your doctor for underlying illness. Before beginning dietary investigation, consult a dietician with an interest in food intolerance. You can find a supportive dietitian through the Dietitians Association of Australia www.daa.asn.au or write for our list of supportive dietitians (confoodnet@ozemail.com.au)

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