BHT – The "Super-preservative"

It's 7:30 on a Monday morning. I am exhausted. All I want to do is sip a warm cup of coffee while reading the morning paper; and yet, once again, the newspaper delivery boy has managed to let me down, forcing me to continue my new morning ritual of reading the all-too-exciting rectangular "Nutrition Information" label on the side of the cereal box. This time, however, my eyes begin to wander further down the side, and land on an entirely new "chapter" of the cereal, where I am bombarded with a whole new set of facts – the ingredients. Unfortunately, this new bit of information proves not to be as thrilling as I had previously thought and, therefore, almost resort to moving on to an entirely new breakfast food. And then I see it, written in bold capital letters in the last line of the ingredients – "**BHT ADDED TO PACKAGE MATERIAL TO MAINTAIN PRODUCT FRESHNESS."** I am completely confused. After having spent a good twenty minutes attempting to solve this mysterious BHT acronym – Big Horse Teeth? Bad Hairy Tarantulas? - decide to give up and go to work. And yet, there is just something about those three letters that make me want to know more… What on earth is BHT and what is it doing in my cereal? To satisfy my persisting curiosity, I investigated.

Butylated hydroxyl-toluene, more commonly referred to as BHT, can be regarded as the "superhero" of all preservatives; watching over the health and well-being of species, policing all types of behaviour, and, ultimately, serving to protect – against free radicals, that is. Free radicals, extremely reactive substances, behave in a troublesome manner - attempting to form a bond with anything to which they might come in contact. Once this "dangerous liaison" forms, however, trouble begins, chaos ensues and the effects which are commonly associated with food spoilage, cancer, disease and aging are initiated. This is where BHT "comes to the rescue," assuming its role as an anti-oxidant and proceeds to trap these dangerous and free radical "troublemakers."

The functions of the BHT "super-preservative" do not stop here, however. Oxygen reacts preferentially with BHT, helping to prevent against the oxidation, and ultimate spoilage, of fats and oils. These beneficial effects are what have influenced companies to use BHT in their products, where it is now routinely used as a preservative in packaged foods. And yet, despite these "heroic" attributes of BHT, there are those who cringe at the simple mention of the additive. Perhaps that is the reason why, for that is exactly what BHT is – a food additive.

BHT has undergone extensive regulation and review required by Health Canada which has deemed it to be a safe preservative. It has proven to be excellent at preventing food spoilage and increasing a products' shelf-life for a number of years. So no longer will I harass the delivery boy when the newspaper arrives late, for I now have a new morning routine; one in which I play detective - determined to investigate what other ingredients might lurk in the rest of my breakfast.

by Emily Shore