FDA Bans Popular Food Additive Red Dye No. 3 (Print)

Years in the making, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has banned the use of FD&C Red No. 3 (Red Dye No. 3) in food and ingested drugs.

The FDA cited two studies of lab rats, where high levels of Red Dye No. 3 caused cancer, as a main reason to ban the use of the controversial synthetic food dye.

Candies, cereals and colored beverages are some of the most well-known products to have Red Dye No. 3 in them, giving them a vibrant, cherry hue. But Jeanna Rich, an oncology registered dietitian with OSF HealthCare Cancer Support Services, says some items might surprise you.

“Some unexpected items it can be found in are mashed potatoes. So, it doesn’t have to appear as red,” Rich says. “Other items are vegan meat products and other meats like sausage. When you see that pretty pink color, that’s not the natural color that is from the meat itself.”

Yellow rice and sugar-free water fruit flavorings, as well as popsicles can contain food colorings in them, mostly Red Dye #40.

“One thing we can do, is when we’re going down the grocery store aisle, flip the package over and read what’s inside of it,” Rich says. “The front can be super misleading. You have to be your own detective for your health.”

Rich says these red dyes aren’t providing us with any nutrition, and instead it could harm our overall health.

“For any child, especially with their developing body and brain, having these in large quantities, we don’t know what that could be doing to their development. We know there is a correlation between hypersensitivity or ADHD in young children and larger quantities of this in their diet,” Rich says. “It is something we should absolutely take out of our food system because of the potential risk and harm it could cause.”

Red Dye No. 3 comes from petroleum, Rich says. Nearly 35 years ago, the FDA banned the dye, known as erythrosine, from cosmetics due to cancer risk. In 2022, a petition was filed by two dozen food safety advocates for the FDA to revoke the use of Red 3 in food and drinks.

Healthier alternatives some companies use for food items to bring red color are herbs, spices, fruits and vegetables (beets, pomegranates, cherries, turmeric, and paprika). Rich says the banning of Red 3 is a “huge win” for Americans’ diets, and she hopes more people become increasingly aware of the foods and drinks they’re consuming. That includes reading nutrition labels much closer.

“Food naturally can give off color. We don’t need to use synthetics to provide that optimal color we’re looking for,” Rich says. “ She recommends incorporating whole foods into your diet as much as possible.

Rich adds that at home, you can use pomegranate juice or beetroot extract when baking to give the food a pink hue.

Red 3 isn’t the only red dye making the headlines over the last few years.

In September 2024, California outlawed Red 40 and five other dyes from being served in meals, drinks and snacks at public schools statewide. The National Health Service (NHS) in England reports E129, which is the European name for Red 40, has been linked to hyperactivity in children.

Rich calls the cereal aisle a “dangerous place” for synthetic food dyes.

“Pop-Tarts, frostings and anything with a bright red or orange hue is not naturally found,” Rich says. She says they can sneak into condiments, like barbecue sauces, as well as Maraschino cherries found in fruit cocktails.

Manufacturers that use Red Dye No. 3 have until January 2027 or January 2028, to remove the dye depending on their product.