

Carrageenan: The Natural Ingredient You Should Ban from Your Diet

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An unnecessary ingredient could be irritating your gut

By Leah Zerbe

Sometimes eating something natural isn't good for you.

Many food manufacturers—even some makers of commercial organic foods—are adding "carrageenan" to foods like yogurt, chocolate, soymilk, and even ice cream to give the foods a thicker consistency and to make low-fat versions taste fuller. Derived from red seaweed, it's often added to beverages to keep their ingredients from separating; you'll find it in many nutritional shakes, milk products, and milk replacements. The ingredient even crops up in certain frozen dinners, soups, and commercial broth products. The problem: carrageenan could be causing inflammation, gut irritation, and even cancer.

"What's striking to me is that carrageenan has no nutritional value," says Charlotte Vallaeys, director of farm and food policy at the [Cornucopia Institute](#), an organic watchdog group that promotes family-scale farming. The organization has been critical of carrageenan's approved use in organics and recently launched a nationwide petition urging the FDA to ban the ingredient from the food supply.

Its use in beverage products could be completely eliminated if companies printed "Shake Well" on their packages, since carrageenan essentially makes sure liquids remain mixed.

Although derived from a natural source, carrageenan appears to be particularly destructive to the digestive system, triggering an immune response similar to that your body has when invaded by pathogens like Salmonella. The result: "Carrageenan predictably causes inflammation, which can lead to ulcerations and bleeding," explains veteran carrageenan researcher Joanne Tobacman, MD, associate professor of clinical medicine at the University of Illinois School of Medicine at Chicago. She says the food ingredient irritates by activating an immune response that dials up inflammation. Her previous work showed a concerning connection between carrageenan and gastrointestinal cancer in lab animals, and she's involved with ongoing research funded through the National Institutes of Health that is investigating carrageenan's effect on [ulcerative colitis](#) and other diseases like diabetes.

The concern over food-grade carrageenan isn't new. Beginning in the 1960s, researchers started linking the ingredient to gastrointestinal disease in lab animals, including [ulcerative colitis](#), intestinal lesions, and colon cancer.

Here's how to cut carrageenan from your diet:

Scan the label. Carrageenan must legally appear on a food label, so check labels of even organic foods to see if it's an ingredient. While organic foods ban the use of GMOs, chemical pesticides, and toxic synthetic additives, the program does allow carrageenan. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standards Board isn't set to vote on removing it from organics for four more years.

Speak up. Sign the [Carrageenan Petition](#) to the FDA to let the federal agency know you don't want this ingredient in the food chain.

Check the list. The [Cornucopia Institute](#) created a [Buying Guide](#) to help you shop carrageenan-free products. Vallaeys says the good news is companies like Stonyfield Farm, So Delicious, Eden Foods, and Oregon Ice Cream are voluntarily working to reformulate carrageenan-free products.

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...the fact that carrageenan is a natural ingredient found in seaweed, it's often marketed as a "natural" or "plant-based" alternative to synthetic thickeners. However, the processing of carrageenan into a usable form for food products involves chemical treatments that can strip away its natural protective properties and potentially create harmful byproducts.

While carrageenan is generally considered safe for consumption, some studies have suggested that certain types of carrageenan, particularly those that have been chemically treated, may be associated with inflammation and other health issues. These concerns are primarily based on laboratory studies and animal research, but some observational studies in humans have also raised questions about the potential health effects of carrageenan.

It's important to note that not all carrageenan is created equal. Some types of carrageenan, such as those derived from natural seaweed, are considered safe for consumption. However, the chemical processing of carrageenan into a usable form for food products can potentially create harmful byproducts, and these byproducts are the primary concern for many health experts.

When it comes to carrageenan, it's important to be aware of the different types of carrageenan that are used in food products. Some types of carrageenan, such as those derived from natural seaweed, are considered safe for consumption. However, the chemical processing of carrageenan into a usable form for food products can potentially create harmful byproducts, and these byproducts are the primary concern for many health experts.

One of the main concerns about carrageenan is its potential to cause inflammation. Some studies have suggested that carrageenan can irritate the lining of the stomach and intestines, leading to inflammation and other health issues. This is particularly true for the chemically treated types of carrageenan that are commonly used in food products.

Another concern is the potential for carrageenan to cause allergic reactions. Some people may be allergic to carrageenan, and this can lead to a variety of symptoms, including hives, itching, and difficulty breathing. While these reactions are rare, they can be serious, and it's important to be aware of the potential for allergic reactions to carrageenan.

Finally, there are concerns about the potential for carrageenan to interfere with the absorption of certain nutrients. Some studies have suggested that carrageenan can bind to certain nutrients, such as iron and calcium, and prevent them from being absorbed by the body. This could potentially lead to nutrient deficiencies, particularly in people who are already at risk of these deficiencies.

Given these concerns, many health experts recommend avoiding carrageenan in your diet. This is particularly true for the chemically treated types of carrageenan that are commonly used in food products. If you do choose to consume carrageenan, it's important to choose a natural, unprocessed type of carrageenan, and to avoid consuming large amounts of carrageenan.

For more information on carrageenan and other food additives, visit www.prevention.com/food/healthy-eating-tips/carrageenan-natural-ingredient-you-should-ban-your-diet.