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What Are Those Parabens Doing In My Tortilla?

by NEDA ULABY

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Meredith Rizzo/NPR

When I invited people over for brunch not long ago, the last thing I expected was a wander into the murky world of food preservatives. It started off so simply — with enchiladas, in fact. Enchiladas are my go-to brunch dish, mostly because a little store near me stocks incredible tortillas from a local factory in Maryland called Moctec.

The tortillas are made only from corn, salt and lime, the same way they've been made for

hundreds of years. They are pliant and delicate, yet still a good chew. I love to dip them in hot homemade salsa (not oil), wrap them around whatever fresh, local produce I can find, top them with cheese and steam them in the oven.

"We make 1,000 tortillas a day," Karen Ponce of Moctec informed me when I called there recently. "We've been doing this since the 1980s, with only fresh ingredients."

But the day before my party, I discovered my neighborhood place had stopped carrying Moctec tortillas. So I went to four Latin American bodegas and two large local chain grocery stores in search of corn tortillas.

My options were a far cry from the Moctec tortillas I'd grown to love. All of the corn tortillas carried by the stores were made on the other side of the country. And when I scrutinized the labels, I discovered that they all contained not one, but *two* different kinds of parabens.

Parabens are chemical preservatives, and I've spent years trying to avoid them in beauty products and sunscreen. But to be honest, I'm not even sure why. Probably, I read someplace it was a good idea, and when you're living in a world so awash in mysterious chemicals and antibiotics, it just seemed like an easy thing to control.

So it was troubling to see parabens when I checked the tortilla labels. Historically, tortilla production in Latin America, where they originated, and beyond has been very local, but increasingly in the U.S., people depend on tortillas that aren't made where they live. People who live in northern Michigan, for example, or parts of New York state or Washington, D.C., are buying tortillas that require preservatives to stay fresh.

But I discovered that parabens are in all kinds of food. Scientists in Albany, N.Y., found them in 90 percent of the food they bought in local markets — they wrote about it in a 2013 study published by the journal *Environmental Science & Technology*.

So how much should we worry about parabens? I called Dr. Mokoto Mukai, who studies food safety at Cornell University, to find out. She told me that most of the concerns about parabens in food arose from a 2004 study published in the *Journal of Applied Toxicology*. But she wasn't all that impressed with the findings, which claimed a link between breast tumors and the concentration of parabens in the tissues.

"You see a lot of shampoos and beauty products advertising now as paraben-free because of the media attention that study received, not because of the science itself," she said.

The problem with the study, Mukai said, is that it didn't compare the tumorous tissue to normal breast tissue, to see if similar concentrations of parabens could be found there, too. And she said the researchers only examined tissues in one part of the breast — the part nearest to the armpit.

"So their suggestion was that deodorant was causing breast tumors," she said. "Because they didn't have a patient without a breast tumor, they didn't have a control group. So that [research] doesn't really tell us anything."

Mukai said some parabens are naturally occurring. They act as antimicrobial agents in some fruits, wine and other edible plants.

When I asked her why we need to add synthetic ones to our food, Mukai said, well, parabens are cheap. As a preservative, they get lots of food to lots of people who need it.

"Parabens have been used for more than 50 years ... and they are safe," she said. She said no direct link has ever been found between parabens and cancer. But more research needs to be done, she said, to understand whether they have any effect on health.

Fine. I'm still going for Muctec tortillas whenever I can.

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