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SULFITE SENSITIVITY AND EATING OUT

Certain individuals are hypersensitive to sulfiting agents used in processing specific foods, beverages and drugs. These people experience adverse reactions of varying degrees of severity.

Asthmatics or other individuals with this hypersensitivity should avoid consuming items which contain sulfiting agents. They can identify these items by reading labels on packaged foods and by inquiring about their presence in foods eaten away from home.

Sulfur dioxide and several forms of inorganic sulfites that release sulfur dioxide when used as food ingredients are known collectively as sulfiting agents. They are marketed as “vegetable fresheners” or “potato whitening” agents and are used to eliminate bacteria, preserve freshness and brightness, prevent browning, increase storage life and prevent spoilage of certain food products. They are also used to improve the quality or texture of finished baked products. According to some studies, five to 10 percent of all asthmatics are hypersensitive to sulfiting agents. Symptoms may include difficulty breathing, flushing, hives, gastrointestinal disturbance and, possibly, anaphylactic shock.

Individuals who have this hypersensitivity should be aware of the major food categories to which sulfiting agents are often added: They include, but are not limited to the following:

- Avocado dip and guacamole
- Beer
- Cider
- Cod (dried)
- Fruit (cut-up fresh, dried or maraschino-type), fruit juices, purees and fillings
- Gelatin
- Potatoes (cut-up fresh, frozen, dried or canned)
- Salad dressing (dry mix), relishes
- Salads, particularly salad bars
- Sauces and gravies (canned or dried)
- Sauerkraut and cole slaw
- Shellfish (fresh, frozen, canned or dried), clams, crab, lobster, scallops, shrimp
- Soups (canned or dried)
- Vegetables (cut-up fresh, frozen, canned or dried)
- Fresh mushrooms
- Wine vinegar
- Wine, wine coolers

If you feel you may be sensitive to these agents or have been so informed by your physician, the following preventive measures are suggested.

1. Read labels on all processed foods. Sulfiting agents may be mentioned on the label, and their presence will be indicated by one or more of the following terms:
 - a. Sulfur dioxide
 - b. Potassium bisulfite or potassium metabisulfite
 - c. Sodium bisulfite, sodium metabisulfite, or sodium sulfite.
2. When order food in a restaurant, ask a manager if sulfiating agents are present in the specific item you desire. Most restaurants have discontinued the use of sulfiting agents on the recommendation of the National Restaurant Association. It is often, however, present in the items purchased from suppliers. Press the manager for a definite answer, but he or she may not be aware of sulfites added by the suppliers.
3. If the manager seems in doubt or you do not receive a definite answer, order an item which is not sulfited such as chicken, eggs, meat or cheese.

For further information or medical advice, please consult your physician.

Prepared by the National Restaurant Association and the Food allergy Committee of the American College of allergists (co-Chairman Sami L. Bahna, M.D. and Robert J. Dockhorn, M.D.)