

The Sulphite Preservative Myth

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Australian food and beverage consumers have created an entire and growing market segment called 'preservative free'. Consumer motivation is health, and in seeking this healthy alternative, consumers are prepared to pay extra for a 'preservative free' label, sometimes accepting a lesser quality product as long as it has a 'no preservatives added' label.

But is it money well spent? Is 'no added preservatives' better for your health?

The Cleveland Clinic, one of the largest Academic Medical Centres in the United States, publishes that approximately 1% of the population is sensitive to sulphites, rising to 5 to 10% of Asthma sufferers. There is a very small minority of the population with a severe sulphite allergy, much like nut allergy sufferers, and in those cases anaphylactic shock can occur from ingesting sulphites.

How can so few people be sensitive to sulphites, when so many consumers are seeking products that avoid sulphites. It is urban legend, often propagated by a medical profession that should know better. There are no tests to determine whether someone is in the 1% of people allergic to sulphites, though we will offer a simple test later in this discussion.

You might ask why there are there no tests to find out whether someone is allergic to sulphite preservatives, when there seems to be an allergy test for everything from dust mites to furry animals. The reason is simple, you can't test for something that is already naturally present in the body. What! Sulphite preservatives in my body? Yes, afraid so, and that is universally case.

The myth about sulphite allergies is often propagated by Doctors, some of whom actually have no idea how much sulphite preservative is naturally present in the human body. Patient goes to Doctor. 'Doctor, I can't drink wine or eat certain foods without getting a headache, the sneezes, a rash or some other reaction'. Doctor considers case, and gives diagnosis. 'Madam, you are obviously allergic to the sulphite preservatives in food and wine'. Another 'preservatives free' consumer has been borne.

But, what about this natural sulphite preservative that is in my body? Few consumers are aware that all living plants create sulphite preservatives naturally to keep their fruit fresh. Fewer people still, are aware that animals (and humans) keep their bodies free from fungi, bacteria and archaea by creating those exact same sulphite preservatives, each and every day of their lives. Yes those same dreaded preservatives that consumers are avidly trying to avoid. And not in small amounts, but 1000mg a day, yes you heard right, **1000mg A DAY**.

How has this obsession with sulphite preservatives come about? Mostly, lack of informed opinion propagates the myth. Try to have a rational conversation with a true believer, and despite a total lack of facts or knowledge, they will see you off with a superior attitude, muttering Neanderthal, or something equally uncomplementary.

Now since we have established that all living things have sulphite preservatives, it follows that all foods and wine have sulphites, unless it is removed by chemical means, which appears to defeat the entire health seeking purpose of trying to avoid chemicals in our food and wine. Since sulphite preservative is a totally natural preservative, Australian Certified Organic approves its use in organically certified food and beverages, including wine. It is normally used in amounts that are small compared to what your body is churning out every day.

Sulphite sensitivity differs from an allergy. Allergies develop to proteins and chemicals in foods. Sulphite sensitivity can give asthma like symptoms, hives and facial swelling and if you are in the 1% that will get these symptoms

from sulphites, it is wise to avoid sulphites. Since allergic symptoms as described, and worse, can come from proteins and chemicals in our food, how can we differentiate between causes and reactions. Good Question!

We will talk wine because many people have an 'allergic reaction' to wine. But first, consider these simple sulphite sensitivity tests:

Test 1. Take a small box of raisins, typically 14 grams. Eat it all. If no reaction in 15 minutes, take test 2. Test 2. Eat 5 dried apricots (35 grams) or 35 grams of raisins.

Test 1 typically has about 25mg of sulphite preservative, and test 2 has about 65mg (equal to the sulphites in about 4 glasses of wine). Not much sulphite preservative compared to the 1000 mg we each create daily, but enough to determine whether we have a sensitivity to sulphites. In fact, there have been many blind and placebo tests with sulphites added to tea for asthma and non asthma test subjects alike, which have established that the overwhelming majority of the population is not sensitive to sulphites, and neither are the majority of asthma sufferers.

Okay, we have established you do not have a sensitivity to sulphite preservatives, at least that is true for 99 out of 100 people that take the test. However, we all know of someone, usually a woman, that gets a reaction from half a glass of wine. So if it is not sulphite preservatives, what causes the reaction? The answer is simple - chemicals. We choose wine to discuss because it has been studied more extensively, has more chemicals in it, and seems to give more people allergic reactions than most other foods and beverages.

A recent publication of analyses of wines randomly purchased in Europe, from 8 major wine producing countries including Australia, showed: *“every bottle of conventional wine contained pesticides. On average four different pesticides were detected per bottle. Sixteen conventional wines contained EU-classified **carcinogens, mutagens or endocrine disruptors**. Fourteen others contained substances recognised as ‘likely’ or ‘possible’ carcinogens by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.” “On average, pesticides were present at levels 230 times higher than legally permitted in drinking water.” “Five bottles of **organic wine** included in the analysis were entirely free of pesticide residues.”*

We gather a hint about the allergic reactions to wine from the chemical contaminants mentioned above, particularly **endocrine disruptors**. Since the **endocrine system** is a system of glands, each of which secretes a type of hormone into the bloodstream to regulate the body, and includes the pituitary, pancreas, thyroid and adrenal and reproductive glands, as well as a couple of others, it would seem that ingesting chemicals that interfere with the endocrine system would not be conducive to good health, and could easily cause hot flushes and headaches.

This same discussion is true for all pesticide treated food, not just wine. It is a bit of a game of roulette.

Now back to preservatives in food. **All preservatives are not created equal**. Certainly most are not naturally occurring in our bodies like sulphites are, and most should be carefully avoided. Take Sodium Benzoate for example. It is a toxic chemical approved as a food additive preservative. It never should be consumed. Sodium Benzoate is often added to fruit juice as a preservative. Sodium Benzoate reacts with the citric acid in juices to form benzene, a cancer causing agent known to cause leukemia and blood cancers. Similar horror facts exist for many 'approved' preservatives.

Be an informed Consumer. Don't propagate myths about sulphite preservatives. Be rightly concerned about chemicals and additives in the food you purchase, and your family consumes, but stick to the facts.