

DR. SONG'S GUT HERO™-APPROVED

HALLOWEEN CANDY SWAP GUIDE

Better swaps for **22 favorite candies** –
plus how to read any candy label like
a Gut Hero™ Food Label Detective.

LABELS CHECKED OCTOBER 2026



by Dr. Elisa Song

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Why your child's gut matters



Hi! I'm Dr. Elisa Song – integrative pediatrician, mom, and author of the national bestselling book **Healthy Kids, Happy Kids**.

Halloween is one of our family's favorite holidays. But some of those treats can be tricks on your child's gut, brain, and immune system. So let me show you how we navigate sweet treats – like a Gut Hero™!

Did you know that you have **trillions of tiny microscopic friends** inside your belly (1) – in your gut microbiome? They help you stay healthy and happy by helping you:



Digest food

Gut microbes help break down food and make nutrients our bodies use (2).



Fight germs

About 70% of your immune system is in your gut (3). A healthy gut microbiome can help you fight germs better all year long.



Feel your best

Good gut microbes send messages to your brain to keep you happy, calm and focused (4)!



Everyone can be a Gut Hero™!

A Gut Hero™ knows how to keep your gut microbiome healthy and happy – so your microbiome can keep YOU healthy and happy! And the first step is learning how to keep away **Microbiome Mischief Makers** that can be hiding in plain sight – in your Halloween candy!

This guide isn't about taking sweet treats away.

It's about smart swaps – so your kids can trick-or-treat, and you can feel good about what treats end up in their tummies. Already ate the Skittles? That's OK! Building microbiome resilience is the key – one night doesn't define your child's health.

How to use this guide

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Meet the Microbiome Mischief Makers
(page 3)

2

Read a label – then try the kids' Food Label Hunt (pages 4–5)

3

Make Gut Hero™ candy swaps!
(pages 6–8)

4

Create your Health Bubble with Microbiome Champions! (page 9)

Meet the Microbiome Mischief Makers

Microbiome Mischief Makers add no nutritional value, but they have the potential to wreak microbiome havoc. Here are the five I look for in Halloween candy. Each one gets its own icon, so you can spot them on the swap list.



1. Artificial colors

On the label: Red 40, Yellow 5, Yellow 6, Blue 1, Blue 2 (and their “lakes”), titanium dioxide

Found in: M&M’s, Skittles, Sour Patch Kids, Dum Dums

Why it matters: Artificial colors have been shown to increase hyperactivity in some children – even children without ADHD (5). In Europe, foods with any of six artificial dyes – including Red 40, Yellow 5 and Yellow 6 – must carry a warning label for parents (6).



2. Artificial flavors

On the label: “artificial flavor(s),” vanillin

Found in: Twix, Kit Kat, Starburst, Jolly Rancher

My rule: If you see the word “artificial,” put it back.

Why it matters: No one should eat fake food!



3. Emulsifiers

On the label: mono- and diglycerides, PGPR, polysorbate 80 (and other polysorbates), carrageenan, CMC (cellulose gum), glycerol monostearate

Found in: Reese’s, Hershey’s, Milk Duds, Laffy Taffy

Why it matters: Food emulsifiers like carboxymethylcellulose (CMC) can disrupt the gut microbiome (7).



4. Preservatives

On the label: TBHQ, BHA, BHT, sulfites (like sodium metabisulfite)

Found in: Reese’s (TBHQ), Mounds (sodium metabisulfite)

Why it matters: In lab studies, sulfites stopped the growth of beneficial gut bacteria like Lactobacillus at levels considered safe in food (8), and TBHQ weakened immune cells that help fight infections (9).



What makes a “Maybe”?

A Maybe is a better choice than the original, but it has an ingredient I’d want you to know about:

- **“Natural flavors”** – unless they’re organic or you know the source
- **Stevia or monk fruit** – in one study, stevia changed gut microbes in adults (13)
- **Natural gums** like guar, xanthan and acacia – okay in moderation
- **Sugar alcohols** like xylitol and erythritol (can cause gas and GI upset in high amounts)
- **Soy lecithin** – in a 2026 lab study, soy lecithin weakened the gut barrier and pushed the immune system toward allergy in lab gut models and mice (14). And soy is one of the 9 major food allergens (15). Sunflower lecithin is fine.



5. Refined oils

On the label: sunflower, safflower, cottonseed, soybean or “vegetable” oil, hydrogenated oils, mineral oil – unless they’re organic or expeller-pressed

Found in: Mounds, Milk Duds, Skittles, Haribo Goldbears

Why it matters: Many non-organic seed oils are extracted with hexane, a petroleum-based solvent (10) – organic rules don’t allow it (11). And in mice, a diet high in soybean oil disrupted the gut microbiome and made the gut more prone to inflammation (12).

Read a candy label like a Gut Hero™

Example label – not a real product

1 Turn the package over.

The only purpose of the front of the package is to get you (or your kids) to look! The real information is on the back.

2 Check the serving size.

The Nutrition Facts label tells you how much is in ONE serving. If your child eats two fun-size packs, double everything.

3 Find “Added Sugars.”

About 4 grams is 1 teaspoon. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 25 grams (about 6 teaspoons) of added sugar a day for kids 2–18 years – and zero for kids under 2 (16).

4 Read the ingredient list.

Look for Microbiome Mischief Makers. If you see the word “artificial,” put it back.

Spooky Fruit Chews



Nutrition Facts

Serving size

1 pack (17 g)

Calories 60

Total Fat 0.5 g

Sodium 5 mg

Total Carbohydrate 15 g

Total Sugars 12 g

Includes 12 g Added Sugars

Protein 0 g

INGREDIENTS: Corn syrup, sugar, sunflower oil , citric acid, mono- and diglycerides , artificial flavors , Red 40, Yellow 5, Blue 1 .

12 g is about 3 teaspoons



Gut Hero™ Tip

Read labels together – even with your babies and toddlers! The more we talk about choosing foods with the most nourishing ingredients, the easier it will be for kids to do the same when they're older.



Kids: try the Gut Hero™ Food Label Hunt on the next page!



FOR KIDS · SCREENSHOT OR PRINT ME!

Gut Hero™ Food Label Hunt



Pick one candy from your bag. Can you find...

Ask a grown-up to read the ingredients with you.

My candy: _____

☐

Can you find the grams of Added Sugars?

Added Sugars: _____ g

☐

How many teaspoons is that?

About 4 grams is 1 teaspoon. Color in one spoon for every 4 grams!

☐

Can you find the word “artificial”?

YES

NO

☐

Can you find a color with a number, like Red 40?

I found: _____

My Gut Hero™ verdict:

Found “artificial” or a color with a number? Swap it!

☐

Keep it!

☐

Swap it!



The Swap List: Chocolate



Inside: Artificial colors Artificial flavors Emulsifiers Preservatives Refined oils
Tags: milk or dark chocolate · **less sugar:** at least 3 g less added sugar per 30 g than the original

SWAP THIS	✓ GUT HERO™-APPROVED None of the Microbiome Mischief Makers	🔍 MAYBE Better than the original, with something to know
M&M's Milk Chocolate	UNREAL Milk Chocolate Gems (milk · less sugar) YumEarth Choco Yums (semi-sweet · dairy-free) Justin's Organic Dark Chocolate Peanut Candy Pieces (dark · less sugar · contains peanuts)	—
Reese's Peanut Butter Cups	Theo Organic Milk Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups (milk · less sugar) Justin's Organic Mini Milk Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups (milk) UNREAL Dark Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups (dark · less sugar) Justin's Organic Mini Dark Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups (dark · less sugar)	Justin's Organic Dark Chocolate Peanut Butter Candy Pieces (dark) <i>Why Maybe: soy lecithin</i> Lily's Milk Chocolate Style Peanut Butter Cups (milk · no added sugar) <i>Why Maybe: sugar alcohols and stevia</i> SkinnyDipped Milk Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups (milk) <i>Why Maybe: soy lecithin</i> 365 by Whole Foods Market Mini Milk Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups (milk) <i>Why Maybe: soy lecithin</i>
Snickers	UNREAL Dark Chocolate Caramel Peanut Nougat Bars (dark · less sugar)	—
Mounds	UNREAL Dark Chocolate Coconut Bars (dark · less sugar)	—
Hershey's bar Twix Kit Kat Milky Way 3 Musketeers	UNREAL Milk Chocolate Gems (milk · less sugar than all of these except Twix) Plain milk chocolate – no close cookie, wafer, caramel or nougat swap yet.	Tiny Tony's Milk Chocolate (milk · less sugar than 3 Musketeers) <i>Why Maybe: soy lecithin</i>

A note on dark chocolate: Dark chocolate isn't off-limits, but it tends to have more lead and cadmium than milk chocolate, because these heavy metals sit in the cocoa solids (17). For little ones especially, I lean toward the milk chocolate swaps and save dark chocolate for once in a while.



The Swap List: Chewy & Gummies



Inside: Artificial colors Artificial flavors Emulsifiers Preservatives Refined oils
Tags: **less sugar:** at least 3 g less added sugar per 30 g than the original

SWAP THIS



GUT HERO™-APPROVED

None of the Microbiome Mischief Makers



MAYBE

Better than the original, with something to know

CHEWY, CARAMEL & FRUITY

Milk Duds

Cocomels Original (less sugar · dairy-free)

—

Skittles

YumEarth Organic Giggles
Look for “organic natural flavors” on the bag.

—

Starburst
 Laffy Taffy
 Airheads

YumEarth Organic Chewys
Look for “organic natural flavors” on the bag.

—

GUMMIES

Haribo
 Goldbears

—

Surf Sweets Organic Fruity Bears

Why Maybe: natural flavors – organic on some bags, not others

Black Forest Organic Gummy Bears

Why Maybe: natural flavors (not all organic)

YumEarth Gummy Bears

Why Maybe: natural flavors (not organic)

Swedish Fish

Surf Sweets Organic DelishFish

—

Sour Patch Kids
 Trolli Sour Brite
 Crawlers

—

YumEarth Organic Sour Littles (less sugar than Sour Patch Kids)

Why Maybe: natural flavors (not organic)

SmartSweets Sour Blast Buddies (no added sugar)

Why Maybe: stevia

The Swap List: Lollipops & Licorice



Inside: Artificial colors Artificial flavors Emulsifiers Preservatives Refined oils

SWAP THIS



GUT HERO™-APPROVED

None of the Microbiome Mischief Makers



MAYBE

Better than the original, with something to know

LOLLIPOPS & HARD CANDY

Dum Dums
Tootsie Pops

YumEarth Organic Fruit Hard Candy (not on a stick)

YumEarth Organic Lollipops

Why Maybe: natural flavors (not organic)

Zollipops (no added sugar)

Why Maybe: sugar alcohols and stevia. Has xylitol – keep away from dogs

Jolly Rancher

YumEarth Organic Fruit Hard Candy

Torie & Howard Organic Hard Candy

Why Maybe: natural flavors (not organic)

LICORICE

Twizzlers
Strawberry

—

YumEarth Organic Strawberry Licorice

Why Maybe: natural flavors (not organic)

Panda Natural Strawberry Licorice

Why Maybe: natural flavors (not organic)

NO CLOSE SWAP YET

Nerds
Brach's Candy Corn

No verified swap yet. The Switch Witch (who trades candy for a small toy or treat overnight) can leave a non-candy treat instead.



Swaps are step one!

Next, build a **Health Bubble** – the simple habits that help your kids bounce back from Halloween treats (and how the Switch Witch works in our house).
Turn to page 9!

Build a Health Bubble

Remember, the key to lifelong health is not about getting rid of all “treats.” It’s about knowing where the “tricks” lie, and learning how to build resilience so that your kids can bounce back!

For the days before and after Halloween, surround the treats with a **Health Bubble** – the foods and habits that protect your child’s microbiome, brain, and immune system.

1. Get in your Microbiome Champions

Our good microbes need us to feed them Microbiome Champions, so that they can keep US healthy and happy!



Fiber

Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (lentils, beans), nuts and seeds



Phytonutrients

The color in plant-based foods. Every color matters – even tan (think walnuts)!



Fermented foods

Loaded with probiotics (good microbes) and amazing health compounds called postbiotics!

Fermented food ideas: yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi or miso – or make the **Fermented Blackberry Lemonade** recipe in my book!



2. Help their bodies clear out the Microbiome Mischief Makers

Make sure your child is eliminating unwanted waste products efficiently through their sweat (exercise), pee (hydration), and poop (fiber).



3. Calm and sleep

Keep stress low and protect a good night’s sleep – both support a resilient gut microbiome.

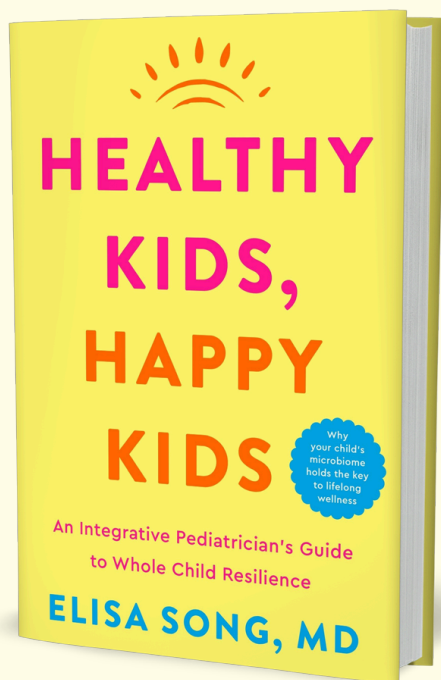


4. Let the Switch Witch visit

Our kids get to choose a few select “treats” to enjoy, and then swap the rest out for Gut Hero™-approved candy or non-candy treats from the Switch Witch. I do let my kids eat some of their loot – in my experience, banning it all just backfires, now and in their future relationship with candy. But I guide them toward making Gut Hero™-approved choices, and we double down on our Health Bubble.

Become a Gut Hero™ Food Label Detective

“Learning how to read food labels like a Gut Hero™ is one of the most important life skills you can teach your kids.”



This guide covers one candy aisle. In my national bestselling book, **Healthy Kids, Happy Kids**, I teach you and your kids how to read every label like a Gut Hero™ – so you can find Gut Hero™ swaps for the whole grocery store.

Inside the book:

- ✓ 5 simple steps to create Microbiome Magic™ every day
- ✓ How to heal the gut to get to the root of chronic health concerns
- ✓ An A-to-Z guide to natural remedies for 25 common childhood illnesses
- ✓ How to raise kids who make healthy choices on their own – without nagging
- ✓ How to become a Gut Hero™ Food Label Detective
- ✓ Quizzes, protocols and gut-friendly recipes



Healthy Kids, Happy Kids

Get the book →

healthykidshappykids.com/book



xo Elisa Song, MD

Keep in touch!

Sign up for my newsletter at healthykidshappykids.com

Follow me on Instagram: [@healthykids_happykids](https://www.instagram.com/healthykids_happykids)

Did your kids do the Food Label Hunt? Snap a photo and tag [@healthykids_happykids](https://www.instagram.com/healthykids_happykids)!

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This guide is for education only and isn't a substitute for advice from your child's own doctor. Swaps are based on labels checked in October 2026. Ingredients change, so always read the label!