



IT'S YOUR HEALTH



The Safety of Food Additives

The Issue

Food additives are chemicals that manufacturers or processors add to foods for various reasons, such as to preserve foods or improve their appearance. Although food additives have been used for many years, some people have become concerned about their safety and want to minimize the amount of food additives they consume.

Background

Generally speaking, a food additive is any chemical substance added to a food during manufacturing or processing that becomes a part of the food or affects the food's characteristics, such as its colour or texture. Some food additives are derived from natural sources. Others are made synthetically.

The Government of Canada controls the use of food additives under the Food and Drugs Act and the Food and Drug Regulations. The Regulations list the food additives that may be used in Canada. They also specify in which foods the additives may be used, and the maximum amounts that may be used.

Food additives may be used for a variety of reasons, including:

- To maintain the nutritional quality of a food
- To help preserve the food, resulting in a longer shelf life
- To make foods more attractive to consumers in a manner that is not deceptive

Some specific examples of food additives and their functions include:

- Anti-caking agents that keep powders running freely (for example, magnesium carbonate in icing sugar)
- Colours (natural and synthetic) that give food an appetizing appearance (for example, carotene in butter and cheese)
- Enzymes that are involved in desired chemical reactions in foods (for example, rennet in curdling milk in the making of cheese)
- Preservatives that inhibit the growth of moulds, yeast, or bacteria (for example, sodium diacetate in bread)
- Texture-modifying agents that provide a desired consistency in foods (for example, diglycerides in ice cream)

The following substances are not regulated as food additives:

- Common ingredients such as salt, sugar, and starch
- Vitamins, minerals, and amino acids which are added to improve the nutritional quality of a food
- Spices, seasonings, and flavourings
- Agricultural chemicals
- Food packaging materials
- Veterinary drugs.

Safety of Food Additives

Health Canada works to ensure that the food additives allowed in Canada do not pose a health hazard when used according to the established Regulations. Health Canada evaluates the safety of new food additives before they are listed in the Regulations. If new information raises concerns about a currently permitted food additive, the information is assessed. When necessary, Health Canada can either change the conditions under which a food additive can be used, or remove the food additive from the Regulations so it is no longer permitted.

Minimizing Food Additives

Food additives allow manufacturers to provide a wide variety of convenient and enjoyable foods. However, if you want to limit additives in your diet, follow these steps.

- Eat fresh foods. Generally speaking, eating fresh fruits and vegetables, eggs, and milk will reduce the amount of food additives you eat, as compared to eating processed foods.

- Learn more. Read the labels on food products and find out what is in the foods you buy. In Canada, most pre-packaged foods have to carry a list of ingredients, including food additives. In general, the list must show the ingredients in descending order of proportion by weight, so that the major ingredients are found at the beginning of the list. However, some ingredients, including food additives (which are often present in food in much smaller amounts), spices, flavours, vitamins, and minerals are allowed to appear at the end of the list in any order, regardless of their proportion. For a list of food additives that are allowed in Canada, see the Need More Info? section.
- Make your views known. While the Food and Drug Regulations specify which food additives are allowed in Canada, it is up to food manufacturers to decide whether or not to use them. If you are concerned about what is in the foods you eat, contact the manufacturer or grocery retailer to let them know your views.
- Choose a variety of foods based on Canada's Food Guide, the link can be found in the Need More Info? section.

Government of Canada's Role

Maintaining the safety of Canada's food supply is a shared responsibility among government, industry, and consumers. The Government of Canada is committed to doing its part to ensure Canada's food supply is safe.

Together, Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) administer the Food and Drugs Act and Food and Drug Regulations. The Health Products and Food Branch of Health

Canada is responsible for evaluating and approving new food additives. The CFIA enforces Canada's food labelling laws and the food safety standards set by Health Canada.

Need More Info?

For more information on food additives, check out these sources:

Health Canada's Food Additive Dictionary lists food additives that are allowed in Canada. The "Definition of Codes" describes the general purposes of various classes of additives.
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodadditives

The Bureau of Chemical Safety is responsible for policy, standard setting, risk assessment, research, and evaluation activities related to non-agricultural chemicals in foods in Canada.
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/branch-dirgen/hpfb-dgpsa/fd-da/bcs-bsc/index_e.html

Bureau of Chemical Safety, Food Directorate
Health Products and Food Branch,
Health Canada Sir Frederick G. Banting Research Centre
251 Sir Frederick Banting Driveway
Postal Locator 2203G2
Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0L2

For information about food labelling, go to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's Fair Labelling Practices Program
www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/labeti/labetrie.shtml



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Other food-related information can be found at Health Canada's Food and Nutrition Web site and Food Safety Web site:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/index_e.html

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/index_e.html

For the Food and Drugs Act and Food and Drug Regulations visit:

www.laws.justice.gc.ca/en/showtdm/cs/F-27///en

www.laws.justice.gc.ca/en/F-27/C.R.C.-c.870/index.html

For information on Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide, My Food Guide and food recalls go to:

www.healthycanadians.gc.ca

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:

www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh

You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709

or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*

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