



## What are food additives?

Food additives are an important component of our food supply. They mean that we can enjoy a wide variety of foods throughout the year. They also have an important role in ensuring that our food lasts longer and is easier to use. There are good reasons for the use of food additives. They can be used to:

- improve the keeping quality or stability of a food. For example, sorbitol - humectant (420) - may be added to mixed dried fruit to maintain the moisture level and softness of the fruit;
- preserve food when this is the most practical way of extending its storage life. For example, sulphur dioxide - preservative (220) - is added to some meat products such as sausage meat to prevent the bugs that cause food poisoning from growing; and
- improve the taste or appearance of a processed food. For example, lecithin - emulsifier (322) - may be added to margarine to help maintain texture.

Additives are used in processed foods in relatively small quantities. Many substances used as additives also occur naturally, such as vitamin C or ascorbic acid (300) in fruit and lecithin (322) in eggs or soy beans.

## How do I know what additives are in food?

If you want to know more about a particular food additive look at the ingredient list on the food label where you will find the additives name and number, for example, food acid (260).

You can use this information to gain a better understanding of what is in the food you eat and why different food additives are used. This is an example of an ingredient list, which might appear on a packaged stir-fry meal:

Ingredients - pork, wheat flour, capsicum, pineapple, green beans, sweet corn, sugar, tomato paste, pineapple concentrate, thickener (1422), food acids (270, 260), soy sauce, salt, natural flavours, vegetable gum (415), water added.

The name of an approved food additive must be spelt out in full on a food label if it doesn't have an appropriate class name or if an additive number hasn't been allocated to it.

## What do additives do?

Some food additives have more than one use. Food additives are listed according to their functional or class names;

- **colourings** add or restore colour to foods;
- **colour retention** agents retain or intensify the colour of a food;
- **preservatives** help protect against deterioration caused by micro-organisms;
- **artificial sweetening** substances are substances which impart a sweet taste for fewer kilojoules/calories than sugar;
- **flavour enhancers** improve the flavour and/or aroma of food;
- **flavourings** restore taste losses due to processing, maintain uniformity and make food more palatable;
- **anti-caking** agents keep powdered products such as salt, flowing freely when poured;
- **emulsifiers** help to prevent oil and water mixtures separating into layers;
- **food acids** help maintain a constant level of sourness in food;
- **humectants** prevent foods such as dried fruits from drying out;

- **mineral salts** improve the texture of foods, such as processed meats;
- **thickeners** and **vegetable gums** improve texture and maintain uniform consistency;
- **stabilisers** maintain the uniform dispersion of substances in a food;
- **flour treatment** agents are substances added to flour to improve baking quality or appearance;
- **glazing** agents impart a shiny appearance or provide a protective coating to a food;
- **propellants** are gases which help propel food from a container.

## Who controls the use of food additives?

The use of food additives in foods is regulated by the Food Standards Code and enforced in Australia under State and Territory food laws. Standard 1.3.1 defines the uses of food additives in foods. Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) is responsible for the development of, or variation to, food standards in the Food Standards Code. The FSANZ Board recommends its decisions to a Ministerial Council, made up of State, Territory, Commonwealth and New Zealand Ministers, prior to adoption into the Code.

Before recommending the use of any new additive in a particular food, FSANZ needs to know:

- Is the additive safe to eat (at the requested level in that particular food)?
- Are there good technological reasons for the use of the additive?
- Will consumers be clearly informed about its presence?

Only if satisfied on these points will FSANZ recommend a maximum level of the additive permitted in particular foods, based on technological need and providing it is well within safe limits.

## Food additive safety

FSANZ only allows for the use of additives if it can be demonstrated that no harmful effects are expected to result. This involves FSANZ evaluating the data obtained from extensive testing of the additive. A decision on food additive safety is based on the acceptable daily intake (ADI), which is the amount of a food additive that can be eaten every day for an entire lifetime without adverse effect.

## Intolerance and food additives

Adverse reactions to food additives occur in a small proportion of the population. A few people are intolerant to some food additives. Intolerance does not depend on whether the food additive is derived from a natural or synthetic source. More people are intolerant to common foods such as peanuts, milk or eggs than to food additives.

The labelling of food products helps people who are sensitive to some food additives to avoid them.

## More information

This information is an extract from the Food Standards Australia New Zealand website:

<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/foodmatters/foodadditives.cfm>

South Australian Department of Health website:

[www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs](http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs) click on "food safety"