

About Food Additives



A food additive is defined as a substance or a mixture of substances, other than a basic food stuff, that is present in a food as a result of any aspect of production, processing, storage or packaging. Some additives, such as colour from 'pandan' leaves, occur naturally while others are synthesized. For a new additive to be approved, the food industry must prove that it is needed and safe to use. For some additives, the amount that could be used is restricted.

Labelling

Most food labels list all additives together with other ingredients. Some have 'E' numbers which means that they have been accepted throughout the European Community, others are listed by names. The label must also show if flavourings are used but details of these flavourings are not needed.

Can Additives Make You Ill?

A few people react badly to some additives such as tartrazine (E102). However, far more people are allergic to foods such as pineapples, milk or prawn than to food additives. Food labels make it possible for you to avoid particular additives. Nowadays, more producers offer foods without any additives, hence giving more choice.

Everyday Additives

• Preservatives

Help to make food last longer and safer for consumption thereby reducing waste and the risk of food poisoning. Common preservatives used are nitrite and nitrate (E249 to E252) in corned beef and other cured meat to give distinctive colour as well as preserving the food products.

• Antioxidants

Stop fatty foods from going rancid and

protect fat-soluble vitamins from the harmful effects of oxidation. Two of the most commonly used antioxidants are BHA (E320, butylated hydroxyanisole) and BHT (E321, butylated hydroxytoluene).

• Colours

Are added to make food look brighter and restore the colour lost during processing. Out of the 52 types of permitted colourings, the most commonly used is caramel (E150).

• Emulsifiers and stabilizers

Keep mixtures like oil and water from separating in foods such as ice-cream and peanut butter. These also add smoothness and creaminess of texture and decelerate baked foods from going stale. Examples are agar (E406) used in ice-cream and carrageenan (E407) used for quick setting jelly mixes and milk shakes.

• Flavourings

Include both natural and manufactured substances. This is a large group and is widely used in the flavouring of processed foods. However, they are added in small amounts. Monosodium glutamate (E621) is a very widely used flavour enhancer in savoury foods.

• Artificial sweeteners

Are used widely, as more people seek sweet foods and drinks without sugar's calories or damage to teeth. A common artificial sweetener is sorbitol (E420) which is used in sugar-free confectionery and jams for diabetics.



Tumeric root and powder are sources of natural colourings and flavourings.