



# Fact sheet

# Food additives



Department of **Health**  
Department of **Education**



## What are food additives?

Food additives are substances added to a food during processing. Salt, sugar, vinegar are examples of additives and have been used for centuries to preserve foods. Some food additives are naturally derived, while others are from synthetic sources. The human body cannot distinguish between a chemical naturally present in a food and that same chemical present as an additive.

## Why are food additives used?

Additives are used to:

- improve the taste or appearance of a processed food
- improve the quality or stability of a food
- preserve food when this is the most practical way of extending its storage life
- ensure that food is safe.

## How to find out about a food additive

All ingredients, including food additives are required to be listed on food labels in descending order by weight. Food additives will be listed by their class name and by their individual name or code number. For example, acidity regulator (260) or calcium propionate (282).

Colours	Code number
Tartrazine	102
Quinoline yellow	104
Sunset yellow	110
Carmoisine	122
Ponceau 4R	124
Allura red	129

Preservatives	Code number
Sorbates	200 - 203
Benzoates	210 - 213
Sulphites	220 - 228
Nitrates, Nitrites	249 - 252
Propionates	280 - 283
Antioxidants	310-312, 319-321

Flavour Enhancers	Code number
Glutamates including MSG	620-625
Ribonucleotides	627, 631, 635
Hydrolysed vegetable protein	HVP
Textured vegetable protein	TVP

A full list of food additives can be found in alphabetical or numerical order on the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) website at [foodstandards.gov.au](http://foodstandards.gov.au)



## Who regulates the additives in our food?

The use of food additives in Australia is regulated by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ). FSANZ carries out safety assessments on food additives to determine whether the food additive is safe (at the use levels being proposed) and if there is a good technological reason for using the additive. A food additive is only approved for use if it can be shown that no harmful effects are likely to result from its use. FSANZ sets the Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) for each additive which is the amount that can be eaten every day over a lifetime without risk of harm. FSANZ is constantly monitoring the scientific literature and data and reviewing acceptable levels.

## Are additives harmful?

According to the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA), foods containing additives are safe for most people and there is no concern about eating them as part of healthy, varied diet. However, adverse reactions or intolerances to food additives can occur in a small proportion of the population. If you suspect you or your child reacts to substances in food, you should seek advice from a qualified health professional.



## How to avoid additives

The types of foods containing larger amounts of additives are usually highly processed, are less healthy due to high levels of fat, sugar and salt and should be eaten less often. The best method for optimal health is to ensure your dietary intake is full of whole, fresh foods that look as close as possible to their natural state. These foods are nutrient dense, tend to be free from additives and reduce and minimise the risk for chronic disease.

## More information

[Food Standards Australia and New Zealand \(FSANZ\)](http://foodstandards.gov.au)

[foodstandards.gov.au](http://foodstandards.gov.au)

[Dietitians Association of Australia \(DAA\)](http://daa.asn.au)

[daa.asn.au](http://daa.asn.au)

[Healthy Food Guide](http://healthyfoodguide.com.au)

[healthyfoodguide.com.au](http://healthyfoodguide.com.au)

[Cancer Council WA \(CCWA\)](http://cancerwa.asn.au)

[cancerwa.asn.au](http://cancerwa.asn.au)

## What do food additives do?


Acids Acidity regulators Alkalis	Help to maintain a constant acid level in food. This is important for taste, as well as to influence how other substances in the food function. For example, an acidified food can retard the growth of some micro-organisms
Anti-caking agents	Reduce the tendency of individual food particles to adhere and improve flow characteristics. For example, seasoning, with an added anti-caking agent flows freely and doesn't clump together
Antioxidants	Retard or prevent the oxidative deterioration of foods. For example, in fats and oils, rancid flavours can develop when they are exposed to oxygen. Antioxidants prevent this from happening
Bulking agents	Contribute to the volume of the food, without contributing significantly to its available energy. For example, sugar often contributes to the volume of lollies, while some low-joule foods need bulking agents added to them to replace the bulk normally provided by sugar
Colourings	Add or restore colour to foods. For example, icing mixture is coloured to make it more attractive on cakes
Emulsifiers	Facilitate or maintain oil and water from separating into layers. For example, emulsifiers may be used in margarine to prevent oil forming a layer on top of the margarine
Firming agents Stabilisers	Maintain the uniform dispersion of substances in solid and semi-solid foods
Foaming agents	Maintain the uniform dispersion of gases in aerated foods
Gelling agents	Modify the texture of the food through gel formation
Glazing agents	Impart a coating to the external surface of the food. For example, a wax coating on fruit to improve its appearance
Humectants	Reduce moisture loss in foods. For example, glycerine may be added to icing to prevent it from drying out
Preservatives	Retard or prevent the deterioration of food by micro-organisms and thus prevent spoilage of foods
Raising agents	Liberate gases, thereby increasing the volume of a food and are often used in baked goods
Sweeteners	Replace the sweetness normally provided by sugars in foods without contributing significantly to their available energy
Thickeners	Increase the viscosity of a food. For example, a sauce might contain a thickener to give it the desired consistency

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