



Food labels

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Understanding E numbers



If a food additive has an E number this shows it has passed safety tests and been approved for use throughout the European Union. This approval is monitored, reviewed and amended in the light of new scientific data.

Most food additives must be included either by name or by an E number in the ingredient list. The ingredient list also tells you what job an additive does, such as adding colour or acting as a preservative.

The types of additives that you are most likely to see on food labels are explained below.

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Antioxidants



Any food made using fats or oils – from meat pies to mayonnaise – is likely to contain antioxidants.

These make foods last longer by helping to stop the fats, oils and certain vitamins from combining with oxygen in the air – this is what makes food taste 'off', become rancid and lose colour.

Vitamin C, also called ascorbic acid or E300, is one of the most widely used antioxidants.

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Colours



These are sometimes used to replace the natural colour lost during food processing or storage, or to make products a consistent colour.

Colours commonly found include caramel (E150a), which is used in products such as gravy and soft drinks; and curcumin (E100), a yellow colour extracted from turmeric roots.

Some people think that adding colour makes food look more attractive, while other people think added colours are unnecessary and misleading.

The Food Standards Agency carries out work on colours:

- to make sure that their presence in food does not compromise food safety
- to help our input to discussions within the European Union about the use of colourings in food

The Agency is funding research to investigate whether there is a link between consuming certain artificial food colours and preservatives and changes in children's behaviour (see link below).

Food Additives and Behaviour in Children

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Emulsifiers, stabilisers, gelling agents and thickeners



Emulsifiers such as Lecithins (E322), help mix ingredients together that would normally separate, such as oil and water.

Stabilisers, such as locust bean gum (E410) made from carob beans, help stop these ingredients from separating again.

Emulsifiers and stabilisers also give foods a consistent texture. They are used in foods such as low-fat spreads and other sweet and savoury foods.

The most common gelling agent is pectin (E440), which is used to make jam. Gelling agents are used to change the consistency of food. Thickeners help give body to food in the same way as adding flour thickens a sauce.

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Flavour enhancers and flavourings



Flavour enhancers are used to bring out the flavour in a wide range of savoury and sweet foods without adding a flavour of their own.

For example monosodium glutamate (E621), known as MSG, is added to processed foods, especially soups, sauces and sausages.

Flavour enhancers are also used in a wide range of other foods including savoury snacks, ready meals and condiments.

Flavourings, in contrast, are added to a wide range of foods, usually in very small amounts, to give a particular taste or smell.

Flavourings don't have E numbers because they are controlled by different laws to other food additives.

Ingredients lists will say if flavourings have been used, but individual flavourings might not be named.

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Preservatives



These help stop food 'go off' and mean that food can be kept safe for longer.

Most food that has a long shelf-life is likely to include preservatives, unless another method of preserving has been used – such as freezing, canning or drying.

For example, to stop mould or bacteria growing, dried

fruit is often treated with sulphur dioxide (E220); and bacon, ham, corned beef and other 'cured' meats are often treated with nitrite and nitrate (E249 to E252) during the curing process.

More traditional preservatives such as sugar, salt and vinegar are also still used to preserve some foods.

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Sweeteners



Lower in calories and safer for teeth, sweeteners are often used instead of sugar in products such as fizzy drinks, yoghurt and chewing gum.

'Intense sweeteners', such as aspartame (E951), saccharin (E954) and acesulfame-K (E950) are many times sweeter than sugar and so only very small amounts are used.

Bulk sweeteners, such as sorbitol (E420), have about the same sweetness as sugar and so they are used in similar amounts to sugar.

If you give concentrated soft drinks that contain sweeteners to children aged under 4, it's important to dilute them more than you would for an adult. This is to avoid children having large amounts of sweetener.

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