

UK based Food Additives

Food additives are substances incorporated into foods and drinks during manufacturing, processing, and packaging. Their primary functions are to ensure safety and enhance or maintain key qualities such as taste, texture, and appearance. According to European legislation, food additives are substances not typically consumed as food but are intentionally added for specific technological purposes, such as preserving food. These additives are essential in modern food production, playing a critical role in maintaining freshness, flavor, consistency, and shelf-life. In the UK, food additives are strictly regulated to ensure consumer safety. [1]



What are food additives?

Food additives serve two main purposes in modern food production: ensuring safety by preventing bacterial growth and oxidation, and improving the food's appearance, taste, or texture. These ingredients are added for specific functions, and manufacturers must disclose them on food packaging. The list of ingredients will indicate the additive's function, followed by its name or E number. [2] [3]. Additives, either natural or synthetic, are used in food and drinks to maintain quality and ensure safety during storage and consumption, typically in small amounts measured in milligrams or grams per kilogram.



Food additives, classified by their technical functions, are substances added directly to food to enhance or preserve its properties. Here is a summary of common types and their functions:

- **Anti-caking agents** prevent clumping in ingredients like pancake mixes.
- **Emulsifiers** ensure fats don't separate, as seen in dressings.
- **Flavors** enhance the taste, with MSG being a common example.
- **Preservatives** inhibit spoilage and mold growth, present in many processed foods.
- **Glazing agents** improve the appearance of foods, such as on apples.
- **Colors** enhance or restore color, found in processed foods like juices.
- **Artificial sweeteners** add sweetness, commonly used in sugar-free products.
- **Stabilizers and firming agents** maintain texture and prevent separation, such as in ice cream. [1] [4].

How Are Additives Regulated in the UK?

In the UK, all food additives must be approved before use. Before Brexit, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) handled the approval and safety evaluation of additives for the UK. Post-Brexit, this responsibility now lies with the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA). Food businesses selling products in the UK must ensure all ingredients and additives used are approved and seek approval for any unlisted additives.



Approved additives and their corresponding E numbers can be found on the FSA's website or in the retained EU Regulation 1333/2008. The key regulatory frameworks governing food additives in the UK are:

- **Food Standards Agency (FSA):** Responsible for food safety and consumer protection, the FSA provides guidance on additives and enforces regulations.
- **European Union (EU):** Although the UK has left the EU, many food additive laws are based on EU regulations, with EFSA conducting thorough research to ensure their safety.
- **Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI):** This measure determines the maximum daily amount of a substance that can be safely consumed over a lifetime. ADI values are based on toxicological testing and risk assessments by EFSA and other scientific bodies. [5]
- **UK Post-Brexit Regulations:** The UK retained EU food additive rules, including the Food Labelling Regulations 1996 and Food Additives Regulation (EC) No. 1333/2008. The FSA oversees any amendments to these regulations, which may evolve as the UK updates its policies. [6]



Conclusion

Food additives are essential in the modern food industry, preserving food, enhancing flavors, and ensuring safety. In the UK, strict regulations govern their use, with clear labeling to help consumers make informed decisions. While E-numbers and additives may raise concerns, they are regulated to ensure safety at permissible levels. As consumer preferences shift towards transparency and simpler ingredients, the food industry is adapting to these demands.



How to label food additives in UK?

Additives regulations aim to ensure food safety, but their appearance on labels can deter consumers. Many prefer shorter ingredient lists with fewer additives, a concept known as a "clean label." E-numbers, which represent additives, often raise concerns. Consumers sometimes view them as manufacturers "hiding" ingredients, although these codes were designed to improve transparency.

In the UK, food labels typically use the full names of additives, which are less likely to cause negative perceptions and are preferred by consumers. However, for less familiar or more chemical-sounding additives, E-numbers are used. Additionally, space constraints often make E-numbers a practical choice as they are shorter. [7]

According to Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011, certain ingredients must be listed with their function, such as colours, thickeners, or emulsifiers. Ingredients that make up more than 2% of the product must be listed in descending order of weight. Ingredients below 2% are usually grouped at the end. Some additives, such as certain artificial colours, require a warning: "May have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children." [8]