

KNOW MORE ABOUT FOOD ADDITIVES



食物安全中心
Centre for Food Safety

What are Food Additives?



A food additive is any natural or synthetic substance intentionally added to food in the processing, packaging, transport or storage of food for a technological purpose. According to the Laws of Hong Kong, food additives do not include nutrients such as vitamins and minerals used for enriching food, or seasonings like salt, herbs and spices.

Functions of Food Additives



Food additives can be used to enhance the safety and quality by the inhibition of microbial growth; extend the shelf-life by protection against oxidative deterioration; enhance the flavour and odour; stabilise or retain the colour; and improve the texture and consistency of food. They facilitate the manufacture, processing, packaging, delivery and storage of food, thus rendering consumers a vast choice of reasonably-priced food with stable quality. There are many types of food additives and the commonly used ones include preservatives, antioxidants, sweeteners, colouring matters, flavour enhancers, thickeners and emulsifiers.

Principles for Using Food Additives

- Food additives should be used at appropriate levels so as not to affect consumer health.
- The use of food additives is justified only when such use has an advantage, does not present a hazard to health of and does not deceive the consumer, and serves one or more of the following technological functions and needs, and only where these objectives cannot be achieved by other means which are economically and technologically practicable:
 1. to preserve the nutritional quality of the food;
 2. to provide necessary constituents for foods manufactured for groups of consumers having special dietary needs;



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3. to enhance the keeping quality or stability of a food or to improve its organoleptic properties;
 4. to facilitate the processing, packaging, transport or storage of food, provided that the additive is not used to disguise the effects of the use of faulty raw materials or undesirable (including unhygienic) practices of techniques during the course of any of these activities.
- All food additives should be used under conditions of good manufacturing practice (GMP) as stipulated in the law.



Advice to the Trade

- When formulating a food product, food manufacturers are recommended to consider the above principles and should not abuse food additives so as to guarantee the food is fit for human consumption.
- Exercise due care in choosing food additives; only add the right type and right amount of food additives which could serve the desired technological functions.
- All food additives should be used under conditions of GMP, which include the following:
 1. the quantity of the additive added to food should be limited to the lowest possible level necessary to accomplish its desired effect;
 2. the quantity of the additive that becomes a component of food as a result of its use in the manufacturing, processing or packaging of a food and which is not intended to accomplish any physical, or other technical effect in the food itself, is reduced to the extent reasonably possible; and
 3. the additive is prepared and handled in the same way as a food ingredient; hygiene and food safety must be observed.
- Take note of the regulatory requirements under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Chapter 132, Laws of Hong Kong) regarding the use and labelling of food additives. Seek advice from food experts or the authority if in doubt.
- The trade may refer to the website of the Joint Food and Agriculture Organization / World Health Organization Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) (<http://www.codexalimentarius.net/web/jecfa.jsp>) for the safety evaluation and specifications of food additives.

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Advice to the Public

- Buy food from reputable sources.
- Read the label of prepackaged food carefully in particular the ingredient list for the food additives added.
- People with allergic condition, such as asthma patients, may experience hypersensitive reaction due to an intake of some food additives like sulphur dioxide. They should be careful in selecting food and seek medical advice when necessary.
- In choosing foods, avoid as far as practicable those which have abnormal colour, odour or texture; stop consuming the food when it tastes abnormal.
- Report any abnormalities of food to the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) for investigation and follow-up.
- Maintain a balanced diet so as to avoid excessive exposure to certain food additives from a small range of food items.



Legislative Control



When food manufacturers intend to use food additives in their products, they have to make sure that the food additives used conform to the legislation in terms of category and quantity.

When using food preservatives, it should be noted whether the preservatives are permitted to be used in that particular type of food while the quantity used should conform to the legislation. Benzoic acid, sulphur dioxide and sodium nitrate are some of the permitted preservatives. However, they can only be used in particular food items at specified amounts.

For more information, food business operators may refer to the following regulations under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance:

- 1. Preservatives in Food Regulations;**
- 2. Colouring Matter in Food Regulations;**
- 3. Sweeteners in Food Regulations; and**
- 4. Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations.**



Enquiry

For further enquiry, please call the Communication Resource Unit of the CFS on 2381 6096 or the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department's 24-hour hotline 2868 0000.