

Food additives

Food additives are used to enhance the flavour, appearance, freshness or shelf-life of foods.

The food additives used in Australia are carefully tested for safety and generally don't cause any problems for most people. People with food chemical hypersensitivity, however, may react to some or all of the additives listed in this fact sheet.

How do I know if food additives are a problem?

Food chemical hypersensitivity can be determined by a trial elimination diet, followed by food challenges. This should be done under the supervision of a qualified dietitian.

People who react to food additives are often also sensitive to naturally occurring chemicals in foods. Naturally occurring chemicals include salicylates and amines. This can also be determined through the elimination diet and challenges.

Symptoms of food chemical sensitivity may involve:

- > the nervous system eg headaches or behavioural disturbances
- > the gut eg pain, bloating or diarrhoea
- > the skin eg eczema, hives
- > the respiratory system eg sinus problems, wheeze, chronic cough.

Which additives are more likely to cause adverse reactions?

In Australia, food additives must be listed on food labels. Sometimes they are listed by name, but more frequently they are listed by a food additive code number.

The types of additives that are most likely to cause reactions in sensitive people are:

- > colours (both artificial colours and a few natural colours)
- > preservatives such as sorbates, benzoates, sulphites, propionates, nitrates and nitrites
- > antioxidants
- > flavour enhancers.

Additives unlikely to cause adverse reactions:

Type of additive	Code numbers
acidity regulators	260 - 270, 296, 297, 325 - 381, 500 - 507, 514, 515, 529
anti-caking agents	460, 530 - 560
antioxidants	300 - 304 (vitamin C) 306 - 309 (vitamin E) 315 - 318 (erythorbates)
colours (natural)	100, 101, 140, 141, 150, 153, 160a, 160 c-f, 161-164, 170-175
emulsifiers	322, 431 - 436, 442 - 452, 470 - 492
flavour enhancers	637 - 641
humectants	420 - 422, 914, 1518 - 1520
preservatives	234 (nisin), 235, 242, 385
propellants	290 (carbon dioxide), 941 - 946
sweeteners	960 - 968
thickeners	400 - 418, 440, 461 - 466, 1400 - 1450
miscellaneous	508 - 512, 515 - 526, 570 - 586, 900 - 905, 920, 1001 - 1201, 1505, 1521

More information

- > Food Standard Australia New Zealand: www.foodstandards.gov.au
- > Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH) Elimination Diet Handbook with food shopping guide.
To order: www.sswahs.nsw.gov.au/rpa/allergy

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