

ALL ABOUT E NUMBERS



WHAT ARE FOOD ADDITIVES AND E NUMBERS?

Codex Alimentarius, which is part of the World Health Organisation (WHO), defines a food additive as *“any substance not normally consumed as a food by itself and not normally used as a typical ingredient of the food.”*

Additives serve a functional purpose in food. The most common additives include colours, preservatives and thickeners. Additives are only given an E number once they have been tested rigorously and approved by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to ensure that they’re safe for consumption. There are over 500 E numbers in Europe alone!

IS IT OK TO EAT FOOD CONTAINING E NUMBERS?

Although we should try to avoid things like artificial food colours, it’s hard to avoid E numbers completely because they also apply to ingredients we consume on a regular basis. Natural colours are given E numbers, for example carotene (E160a) is the orange colour found in carrots, and chlorophyll (E140) is the green colour found in spinach. Lots of everyday ingredients are also given E numbers. The baking powder used to make cakes and biscuits rise is also known as sodium carbonate, which is E500.

HOW TO BE WISE ABOUT E NUMBERS

On food packaging you’ll find that E numbers can be written in one of 3 ways: as an ingredient, their chemical name or as their E number. For example: Vitamin C is an ingredient, ascorbic acid is its chemical name, and E300 is its E number. Bear this in mind when you’re checking food labels. It’s not a legal requirement for an ingredient to be listed by its E number so sometimes you may have to look a bit harder to find out what’s in the food you’re eating.

In general, foods with long shelf lives and unnatural colours will often contain a fair amount of E numbers because of the preservatives needed to keep the food from going bad, or the artificial colouring added to the food to make it look a certain way. Look for the sign “no artificial colours, flavours, and preservatives” on packaging. The fresher the produce and the fewer added ingredients a food has, the less likely it is to contain lots of E numbers.

Look at food labels and if you don’t recognize an ingredient, try looking it up on the internet when you get home. That way, you’ll know whether to avoid it in the future or whether it’s OK to eat.

