

Sulphites

Sulphites are substances that naturally occur in food and the human body. They are also regulated food additives that are used as preservatives to maintain food colour and prolong shelf-life, prevent the growth of micro-organisms, and to maintain the potency of certain medications. Sulphites are used to bleach food starches (e.g. potato) and are also used in the production of some food packaging materials (e.g. cellophane).

Other names for sulphites:

- E 220, E 221, E 222, E 223, E 224, E 225, E226, E227, E 228 (European names), Potassium bisulphate, Potassium metabisulphite, Sodium bisulphite, sodium dithionite, sodium metabisulphite, disodium sulphite, sulfite, Sulfur dioxide, Sulphiting agents, Sulphurous acid

Which Foods Contain Sulphites?

Greater than 100 ppm of sulfites

- Dried fruits, bottled lemon juice, bottled lime juice, wine, molasses, sauerkraut, grape juices, pickled cocktail onions, peeled potatoes

Between 50 and 99.9 ppm of sulfites

- Dried potatoes, wine vinegar, gravies/sauces, fruit toppings, Maraschino cherries

Between 10 and 49.9 ppm of sulfites

- pectin, fresh shrimp, corn syrup, pickled peppers, pickles/relish, corn starch, hominy, frozen potatoes, maple syrup, imported jams and jellies, fresh mushrooms, imported sausages and meats, cordials (alcoholic), dehydrated vegetables, various cheeses, corn bread/muffin mix, canned/jarred clams, clam chowder, avocado dip/guacamole, imported fruit juices and soft drinks, ciders and cider vinegars

Less than 10 ppm of sulfites

- malt vinegar, canned potatoes, beer, dry soup mix, soft drinks, frozen pizza and pie dough, beet sugar, gelatin, coconut, fresh fruit salad, domestic jams and jellies, crackers, cookies, grapes, high fructose corn syrup

Non-food sources of sulphites:

- Bottle sanitizing solution for home brewing

Why are Sulphites Added to Foods?

Sulphites are added to foods for various reasons. These include:

- Reduction of spoilage by bacteria
- Slows the browning of fruit, vegetables and seafood
- Inhibits growth of bacteria during fermentation of wines
- Conditioning of dough in frozen pie and pizza crust
- Bleaching effect for maraschino cherries and hominy

In the past, sulphites were added to fresh foods in restaurants and grocery stores to prevent browning. An increase in reactions led the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ban the use of sulphites in fresh foods in 1986, particularly on fresh lettuce in salad bars. The FDA now requires that any food containing more than 10 parts per million (ppm) concentrations of sulphites to be declared on the label. Foods that contain less than 10 ppm of sulphites have not been shown to cause symptoms, even in people allergic to sulphites.

