



# Sulphites

Priority  
allergens  
2016



**Allergic reactions are severe adverse reactions that occur when the body's immune system overreacts to a particular allergen. These reactions may be caused by food, insect stings, latex, medications and other substances. In Canada, the priority food allergens are peanuts, tree nuts (almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamia nuts, pecans, pine nuts, pistachio nuts and walnuts), sesame seeds, milk, eggs, seafood (fish, crustaceans and shellfish), soy, wheat, triticale, and mustard.**

**Sulphites (a food additive), which do not cause true allergic reactions, are generally grouped with the priority allergens because sulphite-sensitive individuals may react to sulphites with allergy-like symptoms. Those who have asthma are most at risk to sulphite sensitivity and other forms of sulphite reactions.**

## **What are the symptoms of an allergic or allergic-type reaction?**

When someone comes in contact with a food allergen or added sulphites, the symptoms of an allergic or allergic-type reaction may develop quickly and rapidly progress from mild to severe. The most severe form of an allergic reaction is called anaphylaxis. Symptoms can include breathing difficulties, a drop in blood pressure or shock, which may result in loss of consciousness and even death. A person experiencing an allergic reaction may have any of the following symptoms:

- Flushed face, hives or a rash, red and itchy skin
- Swelling of the eyes, face, lips, throat and tongue
- Trouble breathing, speaking or swallowing
- Anxiety, distress, faintness, paleness, sense of doom, weakness
- Cramps, diarrhea, vomiting
- A drop in blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, loss of consciousness

### How are severe allergic reactions treated?

Currently there is no cure for food allergies. The only option for managing the risk is to completely avoid the specific priority allergen. Appropriate emergency treatment for anaphylaxis (a severe allergic reaction) includes an injection of epinephrine, which is available in an auto-injector device. Epinephrine must be administered as soon as symptoms of a severe allergic reaction appear. The injection must be followed by further treatment and observation in a hospital emergency room. If your allergist has diagnosed you with a food allergy and prescribed epinephrine, carry it with you all the time and know how to use it. Follow your allergist's advice on how to use an auto-injector device.

### Frequently asked questions about sulphite sensitivity

#### What are sulphites?

Sulphites are substances that naturally occur in some foods 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).

The sulphites that can be added to foods in Canada are potassium bisulphite, potassium metabisulphite, sodium bisulphite, sodium dithionite, sodium metabisulphite, sodium sulphite, sulphur dioxide and sulphurous acid. These can also be declared using the common names sulfites, sulphites, sulfiting agents or sulphiting agents.

#### Are sulphites safe to eat?

Yes, for the majority of consumers. However, some sulphite-sensitive people, many of whom also have asthma, may react to sulphites with allergy-like symptoms. Sulphites can trigger asthma and symptoms of anaphylactic reaction.

#### I have a sulphite sensitivity. How can I avoid a sulphite-related reaction?

Avoid all food and products that contain sulphites and sulphite derivatives. These include any product whose label carries a precautionary statement warning that the product "may contain" or "may contain traces of" sulphites.

#### Can I have a sulphite-related reaction even if I do not eat a food or use a product that contains sulphites or sulphite derivatives?

Yes. There have been reported reactions to inhaled sulphites; however, not from food itself. If sulphites and sulphite derivatives are not present in food, a reaction cannot occur. However, sulphites and sulphite derivatives can often be present under different names, e.g., potassium bisulphite. For other common ingredient label names, refer to the list below. Always read the ingredient list carefully.

### What do I do if I am not sure whether a product contains sulphites or sulphite derivatives?

If you have a sulphite sensitivity, do not eat or use the product. Get ingredient information from the manufacturer.

### Does product size affect the likelihood of an allergic reaction?

Product size does not affect the likelihood of a reaction; however, the same brand of product may be safe to consume for one product size but not another. This is because product formulation may vary between different product sizes of the same product. **Always read the ingredient lists carefully.**

### Avoiding sulphites and sulphite derivatives

Make sure you read product labels carefully to avoid products that contain sulphites and sulphite derivatives. Certain medications contain sulphites, yet are safe for and may be used by sulphite-sensitive people as directed by an allergist. Avoid food and products that do not have an ingredient list and read labels every time you shop. Manufacturers may occasionally change their recipes or use different ingredients for varieties of the same brand. Refer to the following list before shopping:

#### Other names for sulphites

In the past, some products have used other names for sulphites on their labels. These names are not permitted without the common name of the sulphites also appearing on the label, based on the enhanced labelling requirements for food allergens, gluten sources and added sulphites; however, if you have a sulphite sensitivity and see one of the following in the list of ingredients on a product you should not eat it.

E 220, E 221, E 222, E 223, E 224, E 225, E 226, E 227, E 228 (European names)



## Examples of foods and products that often contain sulphites

- Alcoholic and non-alcoholic beer and cider
- Bottled lemon and lime juices and concentrates
- Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables
- Cereal, cornmeal, cornstarch, crackers and muesli
- Condiments, for example, coleslaw, horseradish, ketchup, mustard, pickles, relish and sauerkraut
- Dehydrated, mashed, peeled and pre-cut potatoes, and frozen french fries
- Dried fruits and vegetables, such as apricots, coconut and raisins, sweet potato
- Dried herbs, spices and teas
- Fresh grapes
- Fruit fillings and syrups, gelatin, jams, jellies, preserves, marmalade, molasses and pectin
- Fruit and vegetable juices
- Glazed and glacéed fruits, for example, maraschino cherries
- Starches, (for example, corn starch, potato starch)
- Sugar syrups, for example, glucose, glucose solids, syrup dextrose, corn syrup, table syrup
- Tomato pastes, pulps and purees
- Vinegar and wine vinegar
- Wine

*Avoid food and products that do not have an ingredient list and read labels every time you shop.*

### Other possible sources of sulphites

- Baked goods, especially with dried fruits
- Deli meats, hot dogs and sausages
- Dressings, gravies, guacamole, sauces, soups and soup mixes
- Fish, crustaceans and shellfish
- Granola bars, especially with dried fruit
- Noodle and rice mixes
- Snack foods, for example, raisins, fruit salad
- Soy products

### Non-food sources of sulphites

- Bottle-sanitizing solutions for home brewing
- Cellophane

*Note: These lists are not complete and may change. Food and food products purchased from other countries, through mail-order or the Internet, are not always produced using the same manufacturing and labelling standards as in Canada.*

## What can I do?

### Be informed

Consult your doctor or an allergist in order to obtain the advice and support needed to help manage your condition. Contact your local allergy association for further information.

If you or anyone you know has food allergies or sensitivities and would like to receive information about food being recalled due to improper allergen labelling, sign up for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's (CFIA) free e-mail "Food Recalls and Allergy Alerts" notification service available at [www.inspection.gc.ca](http://www.inspection.gc.ca). When you sign up you will automatically receive food recall public warnings.

### Before eating

Allergists recommend that if you **do not have** your auto-injector device with you that you **do not eat**. If the label indicates that a product "contains:" or "may contain:" sulphite or sulphite derivatives, do not eat it. If you do not recognize an ingredient or there is no ingredient list available, avoid the product.

## Watch out for allergen cross contamination!

Cross contamination is the transfer of an ingredient (food allergen) to a product that does not normally have that ingredient in it. Through cross contamination, a food that should not contain the allergen could become dangerous to eat for those who are allergic.

Cross contamination can happen:

- during **food manufacturing** through shared production and packaging equipment;
- at **retail** through shared equipment, e.g., cheese and deli meats sliced on the same slicer; and through bulk display of food products, e.g., bins of baked goods, bulk nuts; and
- during **food preparation** at home or in restaurants through equipment, utensils and hands.

## **What is the Government of Canada doing about priority food allergens and added sulphites?**

The Government of Canada is committed to providing Canadians with the information they need to make safe and healthy food choices. The CFIA and Health Canada work closely with municipal, provincial and territorial partners and industry to meet this goal.

The CFIA enforces Canada's labelling laws and works with associations, distributors, food manufacturers and importers to ensure complete and appropriate labelling of all foods. The CFIA recommends that food companies establish effective allergen controls to prevent the occurrence of undeclared allergens and cross-contamination. The CFIA has developed guidelines and tools to aid them in developing these controls. When the CFIA becomes aware of a potential hazard associated with a food, such as undeclared allergens, Health Canada is asked to assess the situation. When a serious risk is identified, the food product is recalled from the marketplace and a public warning is issued. The CFIA has also published several advisories to industry and consumers regarding allergens in food.

Health Canada has worked with the medical community, consumer associations, and the food industry to enhance labelling regulations for food allergens, gluten sources and added sulphites in pre-packaged food sold in Canada. Health Canada has amended the *Food and Drug Regulations* to require that the most common foods and food ingredients that cause life-threatening or severe allergic reactions are always clearly identified by their common names on food labels allowing consumers to easily recognize them.

More information on the regulations that enhance the labelling of food allergens, gluten sources and added sulphites can be found on the Health Canada website at:

**[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/allergen/index-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/allergen/index-eng.php)**

If you come across a food that you think is improperly labelled, contact the CFIA and provide information about the product.

Report a food safety or labelling concern:

**[www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concen/reporte.shtml](http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concen/reporte.shtml)**



## **Where can I get more information?**

For more information on:

- food allergies

visit Health Canada's website at

**[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/allerg/fa-aa/index-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/allerg/fa-aa/index-eng.php)**

For information on:

- subscribing to the "Food Recalls and Allergy Alerts" e-mail notification service

visit the CFIA Website at **[www.inspection.gc.ca](http://www.inspection.gc.ca)**

or call **1-800-442-2342/TTY 1-800-465-7735**

(8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time, Monday to Friday).

For information on this and other Government of Canada programs and services call

- 1-800-O-Canada (1-800-622-6232)
- TTY 1-800-465-7735

Below are some organizations that can provide additional allergy information:

- Allergy/Asthma Information Association  
**[www.aia.ca/en/index.htm](http://www.aia.ca/en/index.htm)**
- Food Allergy Canada **[www.foodallergycanada.ca](http://www.foodallergycanada.ca)**
- Allergies Québec **[www.allergies-alimentaires.org](http://www.allergies-alimentaires.org)**  
(French only)
- Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology  
**[www.csaci.ca](http://www.csaci.ca)** (English only)