

SULPHITES

Sulphites are preservatives which are added to some types of food and drink to maintain the colour, extend the shelf-life and prevent the growth of fungi or bacteria. The term “sulphites” is a general term for a group of chemicals including sulphur dioxide (E220) and sodium or potassium metabisulphite (E221-E228) to give them their technical names. Sulphites are naturally found in some foods such as wine and wine vinegars, fermented foods (sauerkraut, kimchi), and even some vegetables, but generally these levels are low. It is the sulphites that are **added** to food and drinks which raise the most concerns for the Food Hypersensitive [FHS] customer.

Sulphites -A Major Food Allergen

Sulphites are classified as one of the 14 major allergens under UK / EU legislation. This means that pre-packed food must clearly indicate on the label if it contains sulphur dioxide or sulphites at levels above 10mg/kilogram or /litre. Unlike the majority of allergens, there is no protein or DNA able to be extracted from sulphites, so checking for their presence in products requires analytical chemistry. Since foodstuffs containing sulphites must declare that they do so, checking the labels is the best way find out if they are present!

Foods containing sulphites.

- Dried fruit (apricots, raisins etc.)
- Beer, wine, cider, vinegar
- Fresh or frozen prawns
- Some processed meat products
- Some soft drinks
- Condiments (bottled sauces etc.)
- Guacamole
- Bottled lemon juice
- Tinned coconut milk
- Vegetable juices, grape juice
- Pickled foods
- De-hydrated, pre-cut or peeled potatoes

What do they do?

Sulphites naturally occur in grape stalks and skins and yeast used in winemaking. They function as a preservative, and an enhancer in the wine.

Many producers purposely **add** sulphites at key moments of the winemaking process to quickly halt on-going fermentation or to help protect the wine against potential oxidation or bacterial exposure and to ensure consistency of product.

Dry red wines usually contain less added sulphites because the grape juice is left to ferment with the skins and stems for longer. This releases naturally occurring antioxidants from the skins during fermentation.

Sulphites will be stated on the labels of food or wines if they are present in greater amounts than the EU legal levels.

- Sulphites help to stop fruit and vegetables turning brown especially peeled potatoes.
- They are also added to prawns/shrimps to stop “black spot”-antioxidant effect.
- They have a softening effect and maintain product colour in dried fruit.
- They also help to preserve foods and give an attractive colour and are used extensively in processed pork products.

Sensitivity to sulphites

An intolerance to food or drink is different from an allergy because it does not affect the immune system.

The effect of sulphur dioxide/sulphites can vary and can manifest in a number of delayed reactions including rashes, low blood pressure, diarrhoea and stomach pains.

With sulphur dioxide intolerance specifically, the sulphur dioxide can irritate the throat-causing it to constrict. This may also cause coughing, wheezing and a tightness of the chest.

In particular Asthma sufferers have a higher risk of developing a reaction to sulphites and/or sulphur dioxide. It is thought that between 3 to 10 per cent of asthmatics experience these reactions.

Certain types of asthma such as steroid dependant or chronic childhood asthma, are more likely to have severe reactions. Around 20 deaths are known to have been as a result of an allergic reaction to sulphites.

Avoiding SULPHUR DIOXIDE

- To truly avoid sulphur dioxide and sulphites you must avoid food and drinks that may contain them so always read the product label and question the chef/server in detail about the sulphite content of meals when eating out.
- Absolut **Vodka** contains **NO** sulphites, and most **Gins** are free from sulphites due to the distillation process.

Alternatives to SULPHUR DIOXIDE

There have been several experiments with SO₂ alternatives in the past, including the use of **ASCORBIC ACID** (vitamin C), but there are very few substitutes which work effectively.

<https://foodallergyaware.co.uk/resources/factsheets/>