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Phosphate additives in food

EFSA confirms serious concerns for human health

Eighteen months ago, the Parliament voted on an objection, co-tabled by Greens/EFA MEP Bart Staes, to the authorisation of phosphate additives in kebab meat. Whilst the sole aim of the objection was to protect human health, in line with the law governing food additives, it was narrowly rejected.

Yesterday, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) published its long-awaited re-evaluation on the safety of phosphates, including as food additives. What it concludes shows that a lot more caution should have been observed by the Commission before proposing an additional use in kebab meat, as well as by those MEPS who voted against our objection.

Phosphate additives in food: how come?

Phosphate is a nutrient, it occurs naturally in some foods and, up to a certain level, is needed by our bodies. However, phosphate additives are also added to our food and EFSA experts estimate that, in the EU, phosphate additives contribute between 6 to 30% of the total average intake of phosphorus.

Phosphate additives (E 338–341, E 343, E 450–452) have been authorised at EU level in 65 different food categories, from processed cheese and UHT milk to bread, cereal based baby food and some alcoholic drinks.

EFSA's re-evaluation warnings

The re-evaluation, which includes a review of studies looking at toxicity of phosphates in both animals and humans, concluded that a high intake of phosphates has a negative impact on the kidneys.

EFSA also sets, for the first time, an acceptable daily intake (ADI) for phosphates (which covers both phosphate occurring in food naturally and those added to food as additives).

What is worrying is that EFSA estimates that the dietary exposure to phosphates of infants (defined as 12 weeks-11 months), toddlers (12-35 months), children (3-9 years) and for some adolescents (10-17 years) may exceed the ADI.

Furthermore, the ADI does not apply to people with moderate to severe reduction in kidney function with this vulnerable population group unable to tolerate the amount of phosphates set at the level of the ADI. EFSA states that around ten per cent of the general population may suffer from chronic kidney disease with reduced renal function.

According to EFSA, the main food categories contributing to dietary exposure to phosphates as food additives are bread and rolls and fine bakery wares (for toddlers, children, adolescents, adults and the elderly), processed cheese (for toddlers) and meat products and sugars and syrups (for children, adults and the elderly).

EFSA's findings back up our objection on phosphates in kebab

According to the EU Regulation on food additives, a food additive may only be authorised if the use is safe, technologically justified and does not mislead consumers. None of these criteria are met with the use of phosphate additives in kebab meat, hence our objection.

The objection, narrowly defeated in plenary in December 2017, called for waiting for EFSA's re-evaluation before approving any further authorisations. Unfortunately, in voting against the objection, not enough MEPS were willing to be patient, even while faced with the potential health risk of phosphates and the fact that alternatives, at least for kebab meat, exist.

The EFAS re-evaluation has now borne out our concerns: phosphates do have an associated health risk if over-consumed. Furthermore, they are so prevalent in our diet that any further authorisations have to be considered with extreme caution.

What next?

EFSA recommends a number of important measures, which we call on the Commission to urgently act on. These include, among other things:

- setting numerical Maximum Permitted Level for phosphates as food additives in food supplements;
- revising the current limits for toxic elements (lead, cadmium, arsenic and mercury) in the EU specifications for phosphates in order to ensure that phosphates food additives will not be a significant source of exposure to those toxic elements in food;
- revising the current EU specifications for some phosphates to include characterisation of particle size distribution since EFSA could not exclude that particles in the nano-range may be present in phosphate food additives

Whilst very welcome, these recommendations do not go far enough when it comes to reducing overall exposure.

It is clear that, with infants, toddlers, children and some adolescents potentially exposed to too high levels of phosphates and the associated health risks, exposure needs to be reduced. As this is not possible to do with naturally occurring phosphates, the use of phosphate additives must be urgently reviewed. With kebab

meat, we already know that alternatives to phosphate exist and can be used instead. This may well be the case for many other food categories.

We call on the Commission to conduct a review of current authorisations of phosphates as food additives, with protection of human health as the guiding principle. Food categories which have been found to contribute most to intake should be prioritised. Technical necessity, as well as benefits to consumer (both of which are requirements under the regulation on additives) should be rigorously assessed, with a view to either significantly lowering the permitted levels in each food category or discontinuing their authorisation for certain food categories completely. Until this assessment if finalised, no new uses can be authorised.

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