

What are E numbers in sweets?

From the sweeties.net wiki

Turn over a bag of sweets and you will often find a few E numbers in the ingredients. They look like chemistry, and in Britain the phrase E numbers is used informally as shorthand for artificial additives. But an E number is simply a code, and plenty of them stand for things that are perfectly natural.

What the E means

E numbers, short for Europe numbers, are codes for substances used as food additives in the European Union and the European Free Trade Association. The idea of a single shared list began with food colours in 1962. Preservatives were added in 1964, antioxidants in 1970, and emulsifiers, stabilisers, thickeners and gelling agents in 1974.

The numbers follow the International Numbering System drawn up by the Codex Alimentarius, the international food standards body, and E numbers now appear on labels far beyond Europe, including in Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa and the Gulf states.

How an additive gets one

In Britain, the Food Standards Agency says an additive is only approved if it has been tested and proved to be safe for its intended use, there is a justifiable technological need to use it, and its use does not mislead the consumer. It also says it will investigate any information that casts reasonable doubt on the safety of an additive.

An E number on its own is not a seal of approval, though. Having one means an additive was at some point permitted in Europe, and a few have since been withdrawn.

How to read the label

The ingredients list must tell you what each additive does, followed by its name or its E number. So a bag of sweets might list a gelling agent, pectin, or a glazing agent, carnauba wax, or an acid, citric acid. The first word tells you the job, the second tells you what it is.

What the numbers mean

The numbers are grouped roughly by job, though the ranges are only a rough guide.

- **E100 to E199: colours.** Carmine, the red made from insects, is E120: see [what is carmine?](#)
- **E200 to E299: preservatives.** Malic acid, E296, sits here, although in sweets it is used for its sour taste.

- **E300 to E399: antioxidants and acidity regulators.** Vitamin C is E300, and citric acid, which gives many sweets their sharpness, is E330.
- **E400 to E499: thickeners, stabilisers and emulsifiers.** Pectin, the plant gelling agent, is E440, and the sweetener sorbitol is E420: see [what is pectin?](#)
- **E900 to E999: glazing agents, gases and sweeteners.** Beeswax is E901, carnauba wax E903, shellac E904, and the sweetener xylitol E967: see [what is glazing agent in sweets?](#)
- **E1000 and above: other additives.** Modified starches, used to thicken and stabilise food, are numbered from E1404 to E1452. Acid treated starch even forms the shell of jelly beans: see [what is modified starch in sweets?](#)

Where the arguments are

A few E numbers have caused real rows.

One that matters in the sweet world is over six artificial colours. After a study at the University of Southampton linked a mix of them to hyperactivity in some children, sweets containing them had to carry a warning on the pack: see [why do some sweets have a warning about children?](#)

Another is titanium dioxide, E171, a white colour. In May 2021 the European Food Safety Authority said it could no longer be considered safe as a food additive, because concerns that it might damage DNA could not be ruled out. The European Union banned it in food from 7 August 2022. Britain did not follow. In 2024 the UK Committee on Toxicity concluded that it was unlikely there would be a risk to health from current UK exposure, so the same additive that is banned across the Channel remained permitted in Great Britain.

If you want to avoid a particular additive, the answer is in the ingredients list: look for its name or its number.

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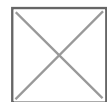
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