

Pesticides in food

Pesticides are chemical or biological substances that are used to kill or control pests during the cultivation and storage of crops. We have oversight of pesticides and food safety in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Defra are responsible for policy on pesticides, for approval and enforcement visit the [Health and Safety Executive](#). Pesticides are sometimes described as 'plant protection products' or PPPs.

They may include the following:

- herbicides to control weeds before and during growth
- insecticides to protect seeds and plants from damage by insects
- nematicides and molluscicides to control attack on growing plants by worms and slugs
- rodenticides to prevent damage and contamination by small mammals such as mice and rats during growth and storage
- fungicides to prevent mould forming on plants in the field and in store

Moulds can damage crops and reduce their nutritional value. They can also produce fungal toxins (mycotoxins) which can be harmful to health.

Pesticides almost always inhibit, damage or kill a live organism so their approval and use is tightly regulated to ensure they don't cause harm to consumers, the environment, users, non-target organisms such as birds, mammals, fish or pollinating insects.

Legislation

Food businesses are responsible for ensuring that the food they produce or import is compliant with current legislation, including maximum residue levels (MRLs).

Regulation of plant protection products

There are the detailed requirements for placing plant protection products on the market, including the procedures for approval of

- active substances
- products and the establishment of the conditions for use (sometimes defined as Good Agricultural Practices or GAPs)

These requirements are laid down in:

- [assimilated Regulation \(EC\) 1107/2009](#) for England and Wales
- [Regulation \(EC\) 1107/2009](#) for Northern Ireland

Regulation of maximum levels of pesticide residues in food and feed

There are maximum residue levels (MRLs) for pesticides in food. These are the maximum levels of pesticide residue that may remain in a food following correct use of the pesticide product in accordance with Good Agricultural Practice (GAP). MRLs must always be protective of health and they are normally well below a level of concern.

MRLs are set out in:

- [assimilated Regulation \(EC\) 396/2005](#) In England and Wales
- [Regulation \(EC\) 396/2005](#) and in Northern Ireland

MRLs are established for every individual commodity for which there is an approved use (GAP). For foods where a pesticide use is not approved and there is no import tolerance (an MRL agreed for imported foods even if there is no approved use), a default MRL of 0.01 mg/kg, or higher, if this is not achievable analytically, applies to any residue found. Any food that fails to comply with MRLs must not be placed on the market.

Imported food and pesticide testing

Pesticide testing of imported food is carried out by Port Health Authorities on our behalf. If a recurring problem is found with a specific product or supplying country, this may become the subject of enhanced controls, which are set out in:

- [assimilated Regulation \(EU\) 2019/1793](#) in England and Wales
- [Regulation \(EU\) 2019/1793](#) in Northern Ireland

Expert committees

The [Expert Committee on Pesticides](#) (ECP) and the Expert Committee on [Pesticide Residues in Food](#) (PRiF) provide advice to government departments on use and approval of pesticides to protect food safety. FSA representatives attend both committees.