Mineral oil hydrocarbons in food

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What is changing and why?

As mineral oil aromatic hydrocarbons (MOAH) are dangerous to humans, the European Union (EU) is discussing setting maximum permitted levels of MOAH in food.

The EU Member States agreed in April 2022 that they should withdraw products or recall them from the market where MOAH levels are higher than the following limits of quantification (LOQ):

- 0.5 mg/kg for dry foods with a low fat/oil content (≤4% fat/oil)
- 1 mg/kg for foods with a higher fat/oil content (>4% fat/oil, ≤50% fat/oil)
- 2 mg/kg for fats/oils or foods with >50% fat/oil.

But these limits are not currently set in EU law. The EU now intends to reinforce these limits by putting maximum levels in law. This is expected to increase the food industry's monitoring of MOAH.

Mineral oil hydrocarbons (MOH) fall into two main classes:

- mineral oil aromatic hydrocarbons (MOAH)
- mineral oil saturated hydrocarbons (MOSH).

The regulatory focus is mainly on MOAH, for which health risks have been identified due to their genotoxicity and carcinogenicity. Currently there are no EU limits for MOSH in food.

AGRINFO has published the following resources:

- Guide with further information on MOH, their origins and effects, the EU's regulatory intentions, the sectors most affected, and actions required to prepare for compliance with new rules, available in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese)
- Video recordings of MOH webinars in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese
- Questions and answers arising from the webinars in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Discussions are ongoing, so some aspects of what is reported in these resources may change.

Actions

There are many potential sources of MOH, and testing for them is complex. Suppliers of food in all sectors should increase monitoring of MOAH to identify any presence in their products. When MOAH or MOSH are identified in food, suppliers should check all steps of the supply process, identify the sources, and develop measures to avoid further contamination. For further guidance on analysing MOAH and preventing their presence in foods, see the AGRINFO Guide (in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese).

Timeline

The European Commission aims to adopt maximum levels for MOAH in 2026 that will apply from 2027.

For more information see the full record on the AGRINFO website – where you can also view the latest AGRINFO Update newsletters and search the database.