

Sulphites reactions can be mild to very severe, but are widely used to preserve foods.

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Some people suffer dreadfully from being highly allergic to sulphur in any form.

It can be confirmed by muscle testing or a specialist, or a "challenge" test in which the patient is taken to a hospital and sprayed with sulphur dioxide or given a sulphite solution. Their reaction is then monitored as the reaction can be severe, and the patient may need resuscitation. Another way to test is to eat dried apricots, as they have high levels of sulphur dioxide, and if there is a reaction, there is a good chance of sensitivity. However, if there is a belief that the patient is highly sensitive to sulphites, they should avoid any high sulphite foods unless under medical supervision. People with a sensitivity to sulphites should also avoid general anaesthetic, as the adrenaline shots used if things go wrong contain sulphite preservatives.

Sulphur sensitivity often mistaken for hay fever, as milder symptoms can be similar.

Many people do not know they are sensitive to sulphites, as they know little about their existence. Doctors, too, are often unaware of the dangers of sulphites, some even deny the existence of sensitivity to this common ingredient. Often antihistamines will be prescribed for the symptoms as they can often be similar to hay fever, such as a runny nose, itchy eyes and a wheezing cough.

The use of sulphites, and sulphur dioxide in particular, has been used since the Roman times. These chemicals have passed into the modern diet without the stringent testing that applies to other modern day food additives as they are seen as "safe" because they have been used for so long. This is despite the many people who are adversely affected, mildly through to severely.

While sulphites preserve the food by preventing bacterial growth, they also cause the food to be less nutritionally useful. Sulphites destroy vitamin B1, thiamine, present in large amounts in meat, dairy and cereal products. The bleaching of flour using sulphur dioxide reduces vitamin E content and beneficial bacteria present in some dairy products are killed by the presence of sulphites.

The law in the UK and US states that all foods and drinks containing sulphite concentrations above 10 milligrams per litre or kg must be labeled as containing sulphites, but many contain much higher levels. Poor quality, mass-produced wines have much higher concentrations of sulphites than more expensive organic wines, however all wines must have sulphites added.

The FDA (US) and DEFRA (UK) both state that sulphites are safe but should be avoided by asthmatics, and those with liver or kidney dysfunction.

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