

What is Codex Alimentarius?

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Codex Alimentarius is, literally translated from Latin, a "food code". It comprises a series of general and specific food safety standards that have been formulated with the objective of protecting consumer health and ensuring fair practices in the food trade. Food put on the market for local consumption or export must be safe to eat and of good quality. In addition, food should not carry disease-causing organisms that could harm animals or plants in importing countries.

The Codex Alimentarius was set up jointly in the 1960s by two United Nations organisations: the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Its purpose was to guide and promote the elaboration and establishment of definitions and requirements for foods, to assist in their harmonization and, in doing so, to facilitate international trade. Most of the world's population lives in the 166 countries which are members of the Codex Alimentarius and which therefore participate in drafting standards and very often implementing them at national and regional levels.

Codex is an internationally used reference point

Although the standards adopted by Codex Alimentarius are not legally binding, they carry much weight and are recognised as being based on sound science. Where appropriate, the World Trade Organisation refers to Codex standards when trying to settle trade disputes involving foodstuffs or food products. National and regional laws and norms almost always take Codex standards as their starting point. In essence, the Codex Alimentarius influence extends to every continent, and its contribution to the protection of public health and fair practices in the food trade is immeasurable.

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Codex standards can be general or product-specific

There are thousands of standards in the Codex Alimentarius, ranging from general ones, which apply to all foods, to food- or product-specific ones. General standards include those on hygiene, labelling, pesticide and veterinary medicine residues, import and export inspection and certification systems, methods of analysis and sampling, food additives, contaminants, and nutrition and foods for special dietary uses. In addition, there are specific standards on all types of foods and food products, ranging from fresh, frozen and processed fruit and vegetables, fruit juices, cereals and pulses, to fats and oils, fish, meat, sugar, cocoa and chocolate, and milk and dairy products.

How are standards prepared?

Codex Alimentarius is run by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which is an intergovernmental body

where all member countries have a vote. Various specialist committees are responsible for drafting standards, which are then adopted by the Codex Commission.

A standard starts life when a national government, or a committee of the Codex Commission, proposes that a standard be developed on a particular issue or food product. If the Codex Commission (or its Executive Committee) decides that a standard should be developed, then the Codex Commission Secretariat writes a proposed draft standard and circulates it to Member Governments for consideration. Comments are reviewed by the relevant Codex committee, which may present the text as a draft standard to the Codex Commission when it is ready. If the Codex Commission adopts the draft standard, it is sent to governments a number of times in a step procedure, which results in the final draft becoming a Codex standard. The number of steps varies from between five and eight and the system is designed to build as broad a consensus as possible. This can take a number of years to complete. In between, the relevant committee supported by the Secretariat amends and adapts the details as required. Sometimes, certain steps may be repeated. Once adopted by the Codex Commission, a standard is added to the Codex Alimentarius - the world's "food code".

More information

- Most Codex documents (reports, standards, special publications) can be freely downloaded from Codex website:
<http://www.codexalimentarius.net>
<http://www.who.int/foodsafety/codex/en>