

EN
E-004753/2025
Answer given by Mr Várhelyi
on behalf of the European Commission
(30.1.2026)

Based on epidemiological studies, the Monograph of the International Agency for Research on Cancer¹ classifies processed meat as Group 1 carcinogen and recommends moderating its consumption. It also explores biological mechanisms that may play a role in colorectal cancer development². In its assessment³, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) concludes that nitrite additives⁴ are neither genotoxic nor carcinogenic and establishes an Acceptable Daily Intake value⁵.

The Commission does not intend to propose further measures on nitrite additives considering that the lower maximum levels⁶ applicable since October 2025 were adopted as a balanced outcome taking into account the risk of the formation of nitrosamines through the presence of nitrites in meat products and the protective effects of nitrites against pathogenic bacteria, while considering a broad variety of processed meat products available on the EU market. However, the Commission is considering establishing limits and taking measures reducing the presence of nitrosamines in foods under the EU rules on contaminants.

The Commission does not consider front-of-pack health warnings on nitrite-cured products appropriate as according to EFSA, nitrite is not carcinogenic, and it is not possible to clearly discern the nitrosamines formed from the nitrite added as a food additive from those formed from the nitrite naturally present in the food or as result of contamination.

The Commission already supported research and innovation projects such as PHYTOME⁷, and NOCHEMFOOD⁸ to explore the replacement of nitrite additives. Other projects are conducted by Member States such as the project NitriFree⁹ which will end in 2026.

¹ IARC Monographs, volume 114, Red Meat and Processed Meat. ISBN 978-92-832-0180-9.

² The monograph particularly identifies the hazards such as (i) 'haem iron' a component of red meat, (ii) 'nitrosamines' substances that may be formed during the meat processing in the presence of nitrites and (iii) 'heterocyclic aromatic amines' and 'polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons', i.e. chemicals occurring at the high-temperature treatment.

³ EFSA Journal 2017;15(6):4786.

⁴ Potassium nitrite (E 249) and sodium nitrite (E 250).

⁵ EFSA defines 'acceptable daily intake' as an estimate of the amount of a substance in food or drinking water that can be consumed daily over a lifetime without presenting an appreciable risk to health:

<https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/glossary/acceptable-daily-intake>.

⁶ Commission Regulation (EU) 2023/2108 of 6 October 2023 amending Annex II to Regulation (EC) No 1333/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council and the Annex to Commission Regulation (EU) No 231/2012 as regards food additives nitrites (E 249-250) and nitrates (E 251-252) (OJ L, 2023/2108, 9.10.2023, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2108/oj>).

⁷ <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/315683/reporting>.

⁸ Novel Vegetal-based Extracts Additives for CHEMical-Free FOOD: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/23060>.

⁹ NitriFree: <https://www.ivlv.org/en/project/nitrifree/>.