# Labour pushes to align UK food safety with EU amid nitrite cancer fears



Fears have intensified regarding the exposure of British consumers to potentially carcinogenic food products, particularly since Brexit has led to burgeoning concerns about food safety regulations in the UK. Critics argue that the government's failure to maintain alignment with EU standards since leaving the bloc has adversely affected food safety, raising alarms about the levels of nitrites permitted in processed meats such as bacon and ham.

In an upcoming announcement of a Brexit reset deal, Labour leader Keir Starmer is expected to propose aligning UK regulations more closely with those of the EU. This move has been buoyed by a J.L Partners poll indicating that a staggering 69 per cent of the British public worry that the UK is slipping behind European food standards, a sentiment echoed even by 55 per cent of voters from the pro-Brexit Reform party. Concerns centre on stricter EU regulations that will limit the amount of nitrites in processed meats starting in October, while the UK currently allows higher concentrations of these harmful chemicals.

The impetus for change is significantly supported by a coalition of prominent scientists and politicians, including figures such as former UK health minister Lord Bethell and Labour's former shadow health minister Sharon Hodgson. Their advocacy, demonstrated through the newly launched Coalition Against Nitrites, stems from alarming findings that link high consumption of processed meats to adverse health outcomes. The World Health Organisation categorised processed meats as a Group One carcinogen in 2015, positing a strong association with colorectal cancer and estimating 34,000 deaths yearly attributed to diets high in these products globally.

Prominent scientists such as Professor Chris Elliott from Queen’s University Belfast have voiced their concerns, stating that the UK's departure from the EU has resulted in a stagnation of food safety standards. Elliott remarked, “While the EU has sought to protect its consumers with better food safety rules, the UK has dithered, leaving British consumers at greater risk.” This sentiment is echoed by Professor Walter Willett from Harvard, who emphasises the urgent need for either governmental intervention or voluntary action from food producers to eliminate these harmful additives.

Further complicating the matter, investigations have revealed that 61 NHS trusts across England serve meat that contains nitrites and nitrates, sparking worries over patient exposure in hospitals such as the renowned Christie and Royal Marsden. This revelation has been highlighted by experts calling for a ban on such chemicals in food production to safeguard public health.

The UK's Food Standards Agency contends that nitrites are essential for preventing botulism in cured meats and cheeses, positing that they play a crucial role in maintaining food safety. However, the EU has systematically tightened its regulations on nitrite usage, initiating a two-year period for food businesses to adapt before the new standards come fully into force in October 2025. The French government has recently recognised the health risks associated with nitrites, launching plans to immediately reduce their use in deli meats by 20 per cent.

As calls for a nationwide reassessment of food safety intensify, political figures like Sharon Hodgson have highlighted the necessity of addressing these health risks. “Knowing what we know today about the health risks of added nitrites, it’s time for a serious conversation about the safety of our food,” she stated.

The broader implications of lax food safety measures post-Brexit are underscored by other troubling developments, such as reports of diseased chicken entering the UK due to delays in post-Brexit border inspections, as well as increased levels of pesticide residues allowed on food products since the UK diverged from EU standards. The convergence of these issues underscores a critical moment in UK food policy, demanding urgent action to protect consumer health and restore public confidence in food safety.

As the government prepares to unveil its Brexit reset plan, the future of UK food standards hangs in a precarious balance, with public health advocates and scientists putting pressure on policymakers to elevate food safety measures, illustrating the potential risks when regulatory oversight wavers.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3
2. Paragraph 7
3. Paragraph 6
4. Paragraph 5
5. Paragraphs 5, 6
6. Paragraph 4
7. Paragraph 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

* <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-cancer-food-nitrates-reset-b2751174.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jul/11/nhs-hospitals-in-england-serve-meat-with-chemicals-feared-to-cause-cancer> - An investigation revealed that 61 NHS trusts in England serve meat containing nitrates and nitrites, chemicals linked to cancer. Hospitals like the Christie in Manchester and the Royal Marsden in London were found to use such meat, raising concerns about patient exposure to these substances. Experts, including Professor Chris Elliott, have called for a ban on nitrites in food production to protect public health.
* <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2025-01-31/post-brexit-hold-ups-allowed-diseased-chicken-to-enter-uk/> - Post-Brexit delays in border inspections allowed diseased chicken to enter the UK, leading to salmonella outbreaks. Health officials acknowledged the lack of border controls, with checks not starting until the following year. This oversight exposed consumers to contaminated meat, highlighting the risks associated with reduced food safety measures after Brexit.
* <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/news/nitrosamines-food-raise-health-concern> - The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) assessed the public health risk of nitrosamines in food and concluded that exposure levels across the EU population raise health concerns. Ten nitrosamines found in food are carcinogenic and genotoxic, with liver tumors in rodents identified as the most critical health effect. EFSA emphasized the need for consumer protection against these compounds.
* <https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2023/03/efsa-finds-health-risk-from-nitrosamines-in-food/> - EFSA's assessment found that ten nitrosamines present in food are carcinogenic and genotoxic. These compounds, which can form during food processing, have been detected in various products, including cured meats and alcoholic beverages. The assessment concluded that current exposure levels pose a health concern for all age groups across the EU.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/feb/17/uk-risks-disastrous-food-scandal-lax-post-brexit-border-controls-nfu-chief-minette-batters> - Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers’ Union, warned that lax post-Brexit border controls could lead to a 'disastrous' food scandal. She criticized the government's failure to ensure the safety of agricultural imports, highlighting the risk of diseases like African swine fever entering the UK due to insufficient checks.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/sep/19/revealed-far-higher-pesticide-residues-allowed-on-food-since-brexit> - An investigation revealed that between 2022 and 2024, the UK increased maximum residue levels (MRLs) for 49 pesticides, including 15 classified as 'highly hazardous.' This change, which replaced stricter EU MRLs, raised concerns about consumer exposure to harmful chemicals in food, with campaigners calling for a reversal of the policy.