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Even with increased limits, the pesticide residues remain in trace amounts that are unlikely to harm human health. (File Photo)

The country's apex food safety regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), has increased the default limit for pesticide residues in spices to 0.1 mg/kg last month, a ten-fold increase over the previous 0.01 mg/kg. This will be applicable only in cases where the Indian regulation does not specifically mention the maximum residue limits (MRL) for a pesticide for the crop.

However, the default MRL for other food products remains the same at 0.01 mg/kg.





This comes at a time when some Indian spice mixes were removed from shelves in Singapore and Hong Kong after higher than permissible limits of a pesticide called ethylene oxide was found.

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What does this mean for your health?

Even with increased limits, the pesticide residues remain in trace amounts that are unlikely to harm human health, said one of the scientists on the panel that recommended the measure to FSSAI.

Examples of limits set by FSSAI and international agency Codex:

S. No.	Name of the Pesticides /Insecticides	Spices	FSSAI MRL (mg/Kg)	Codex MRLs (mg/kg)
1.	Metalaxyl and Metalaxyl-M	Black pepper 	0.5	2
2.	Myclobutanil	Chilli, dried 	2	20
3.	Spiromesifen	Chilli, dried 	1	5
4.	Thiamethoxam	Chilli, dried 	5	7

(Express Illustration)

They added that deciding MRL is a dynamic exercise based on results of field trials submitted by spice manufacturers to the Central Insecticides Board and Registration Committee (CIB & RC). “The limits are decided and revised based on data from the field trials and available evidence on the impact of the pesticides on human health,” the expert said.



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Why were the limits increased for spices?

One, it is difficult to keep the limits below the 0.01 mg/kg limit because of the confounding effect of the large number of phenols present in spices. “Even the sensitive high end equipment can detect it at about 0.1 mg/ kg,” the expert said.

for a pesticide for a particular crop is not present in India.

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Three, there could be seepage of a pesticide not approved in spices from other crops where it might be allowed.

What were the concerns that were raised?

The activists have said that the higher limit may allow for more pesticides affecting our bodies. Experts from the FSSAI have said that the limits were raised only for the tests to detect the compounds effectively. Action will still be taken if pesticides higher than the limit are used. The government maintains that the limits set by India continue to be the lowest in the world.

The activists have also questioned why compounds that have not been approved for use in India are present. The expert said: “Technically, use of pesticides that have not been registered is illegal but the reality is that farmers use whatever molecule is available to them. The problem with spices is that very few compounds have been approved. At around 40 molecules, the maximum number of pesticides is perhaps allowed for chilli, which is cultivated over large areas and has a lot of commercial interest. This is because companies do not want to invest a lot of money in conducting field trials for smaller crops.”

The total number of pesticides registered in India are more than 295, out of which 139 pesticides are registered for use in spices, the government said.