

# CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



World Health  
Organization

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Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00153 Rome, Italy - Tel: (+39) 06 57051 - E-mail: [codex@fao.org](mailto:codex@fao.org) - [www.codexalimentarius.org](http://www.codexalimentarius.org)

**Agenda Item 2**

**CX/LAC 24/23/2**

## JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

### FAO/WHO COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Twenty-third Session

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#### OPENING SPEECH:

#### PREVENTION AND REDUCTION OF CONTAMINANTS IN FOOD

(Prepared by FAO, PAHO and the Regional Coordinator)

1. Food safety, defined as the "assurance that food will not cause harm to the consumer when it is prepared and/or eaten according to its intended use" (FAO and WHO, 2022), is threatened by the presence of contaminants.
2. The Codex Alimentarius Committee on Contaminants in Foods (CCCF) defines a contaminant as "Any substance not intentionally added to food or feed for food producing animals, which is present in such food or feed as a result of the production (including operations carried out in crop husbandry, animal husbandry and veterinary medicine), manufacture, processing, preparation, treatment, packing, packaging, transport or holding of such food or feed, or as a result of environmental contamination. The term does not include insect fragments, rodent hairs and other extraneous matter" (FAO and WHO, 2018). However, it is important to note that the definition of a contaminant may vary in its specifications depending on the scope of the Codex committee that defines it<sup>1</sup>.
3. If food is not safe, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be unfeasible and many of these SDGs will continue to be out of reach, in particular the eradication of hunger (SDG 2) and the achievement of health and well-being (SDG 3) (FAO, 2023).
4. A study published by the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 600 million people in the world are affected by foodborne diseases (FBDs) annually and 420 000 die of the same cause (WHO, 2015).
5. These figures highlight the importance of addressing food safety at all stages of the production chain. The way in which food is produced, processed, marketed and consumed is an aspect of the utmost importance, since in these stages contamination can be generated by numerous microbiological, chemical and/or physical agents, which cause health problems.
6. This is especially relevant in a context where various drivers of change, related to social, economic, technological, and environmental aspects, among others, can affect the environment and global food production systems. For example, there is evidence of the impact of climate change on food safety given that it generates various hazards such as bacteria, viruses, parasites, fungi and mycotoxins, harmful algae, chemical residues, residues of veterinary drugs, among others (FAO, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> According to the General Principles of Food Hygiene of the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene, a contaminant is defined as "Any biological, chemical or physical agent, foreign matter or other substances not intentionally added to food that may compromise food safety or suitability" (FAO and WHO, 2022).

7. Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) stands out as a food producing, exporting and consuming (and in some cases importing<sup>2</sup>) region, with an annual agricultural surplus that exceeds 127 billion dollars (ECLAC, FAO and WFP, 2022). With a significant weight in the global arena, LAC represents 14 percent of world food production and 45 percent of the net international agrifood trade (FAO, 2021). These data underscore the crucial role the region plays in the global food supply.
8. In this context, it is crucial to recognize the food safety challenges faced by the LAC region linked to contaminants. Some of these challenges are linked to environmental effects, characterized by the geographical diversity of the region. For example, countries located in the Pacific Belt are faced with the release of arsenic in water, sediments and soils, mainly due to volcanic causes (Bundschuh, J., Pérez Carrera, A. and Litter, M., 2008).
9. Among the various types of food contaminants that affect the region, chemicals are of key importance. Their presence not only affects public health, but also food trade, and food and nutrition security (FNS).
10. Taking into account the standards developed by the Codex Committee on Contaminants in Food (FAO and WHO, 2024a), the following contaminants can be cited as examples:
11. Heavy metals: Lead, cadmium, and arsenic are significant concerns due to their natural presence in soils, mining activity, and industrial pollution.
12. Mycotoxins: Produced by fungi in crops such as corn and peanuts, they pose a significant risk to public health.
13. Miscellaneous chemical contaminants: These include polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), radionuclides, and other organic and inorganic compounds.
14. The effects that stem from the consumption of food with these contaminants can have serious impacts on the health of the population, as it can cause acute poisoning or long-term diseases, such as cancer. Foodborne diseases can cause persistent disability and death. For example, the presence of heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, and mercury can cause neurological and kidney damage. Long-term exposure to mycotoxins can affect the immune system or cause cancer (WHO, 2020).
15. It is critical to establish prevention and surveillance measures for contaminants in food to safeguard its safety and quality, and to avoid risks to the health of consumers (FAO and WHO, 2024b).
16. All sectors and actors of agrifood systems have a role to play in the prevention of contaminants in food. Member Nations implement regulations, policies and actions that ensure food safety and quality, while the food industry must comply with them and develop a culture of safety with self-monitoring programmes with the greatest responsibility towards consumers. In the same way, consumers play a role in the prevention and reduction of these contaminants in food.
17. Different hazards require different measures. Among the most basic and essential measures that all actors in the agricultural chain (from farm to fork) must follow are good hygiene practices, defined as fundamental measures and conditions applied at any stage of the food chain to provide safe and suitable food (FAO and WHO, 2022).
18. Other resources such as the *Five Keys to Safer Food Manual* (WHO, 2007), developed by the WHO, and the *Food Handling and Instructor Manuals* (FAO and PAHO, 2017) developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), offer practical guidance to educate on and identify measures for the prevention and reduction of contaminants in food. The five keys are: 1) maintain hygiene; 2) separate raw food from cooked food; 3) cook food thoroughly; 4) keep food at safe temperatures; and 5) use safe water and raw ingredients.
19. On the other hand, the *Codex Alimentarius* supports countries in the control of contaminants in food by generating standards, guidelines and international codes of practice on the subject (FAO and WHO, 2024).
20. Food safety requires coordinated multisectoral work under the "One Health" approach that allows effective strategies, in order to prevent, identify, manage and communicate risks in the food chain that arise from the human-animal-environment interface, thus promoting the strengthening of national food control systems (WHO, 2022).
21. Preventing food contamination is a matter for all actors in the agricultural chain. In addition, food safety is not only important for the health of consumers, but also plays a fundamental role in enhancing trust in national and international trade.

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<sup>2</sup> With some exceptions, Caribbean countries are net importers (FAO and IDB, 2024).

22. In so doing, collaboration between and among the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean is essential for an effective approach to the food safety challenge. Codex and its subsidiary bodies play a key role in working collaboratively with its Members, regional committees, and observer organizations to ensure consumer health protection and promote equitable trade practices based on scientific evidence.

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