



AFLATOXIN

Aflatoxins are naturally occurring substances produced by the soil-based molds *Aspergillus flavus* and *Aspergillus parasiticus*, which are among a group of mold-produced substances called “mycotoxins.” These molds are known to potentially occur in crops such as corn, legumes and tree nuts. In large quantities, these toxins can be detrimental to living organisms.¹

In June 1997, the Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA), under the direction of the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization, completed a quantitative risk assessment to determine non-toxic levels of aflatoxin. In 1999, *Codex Alimentarius*, the organization that sets international food trade standards, adopted an aflatoxin tolerance level of 15 parts per billion (ppb) for raw peanuts. A self-imposed limit of 15ppb is the threshold for all peanuts marketed in the U.S., although the U.S. Department of Agriculture has concluded that consumer health is protected at the less strict level of 20ppb.

Peanuts grown and processed in the United States must meet rigorous quality standards that minimize the presence of mycotoxins. Technologically advanced production, processing and grading systems developed by the U.S. industry and approved by the United States government work to control mold and reduce aflatoxin levels. In addition, all peanuts produced in the U.S. are required to be inspected by U.S. Department of Agriculture inspectors and handled under strict quality regulations. Inspections for aflatoxins take place at multiple stages throughout the peanut manufacturing process.

The U.S. peanut industry is committed to ensuring that consumers worldwide receive safe, high quality peanuts and peanut products. The industry spends millions of dollars annually to manage aflatoxin. In 2009, researchers at UC Irvine identified the triggers for aflatoxin formation. With more research, these findings could lead to ways of limiting or further controlling the production of aflatoxins in peanuts and other commodities. The industry also continues to focus on improved food handling procedures from farm to manufacturer, the development of aflatoxin-resistant peanut varieties, improved cleaning and sorting techniques, and enhanced blanching procedures, which help minimize the presence of aflatoxin.

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¹ While extremely rare in developed countries, such large quantities are sometimes found in developing countries. A 2004 study in Kenya reported aflatoxin levels of up to 8,000 parts per billion in maize samples collected from patient households. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov/nceh/hsb/chemicals/aflatoxin.htm.