

# AESAN 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition



GOBIERNO  
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO  
DE CONSUMO



agencia  
española de  
seguridad  
alimentaria y  
nutrición

## INTRODUCTION

The Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition (AESAN), then AESA, was established by Law 11/2001 as a response to the large-scale foodborne epidemic that broke out in the late 1990s in the European Union, colloquially dubbed the “mad cow” epidemic. Almost simultaneously, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was set up, eventually leading to the creation, in collaboration with national bodies, of a solid network of cooperation and information exchange on the overall food chain “farm to fork”, as stated in the European strategy.

AESAN performs functions related to the promotion of food safety and healthy nutrition within the framework of responsibilities of the General State Administration. It is an autonomous body, currently affiliated institutionally to the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and functionally to the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, as well as the Ministry of Consumer Affairs.

The Agency employs approximately 200 professionals, distributed between its Madrid headquarters and the two laboratories: the National Food Centre located in Majadahonda (Madrid) and the Marine Biotoxins Laboratory in Vigo.

Some of its noteworthy departments are the Board of Directors that oversees the achievement of the Agency’s goals, and the Coordination and Advisory Bodies: the Institutional Commission and the Advisory Council, as examples of the fundamental role played by AESAN as the integrating and consensus body that coordinates the actions of administrations at the State level as well as maintaining its links to society, thus promoting its active participation in affairs related to food safety and nutrition. Additionally, AESAN has a Scientific Committee which assesses possible risks that may affect the health of consumers, acting as the national reference in this task.

The work carried out by the Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition has the following goals:

- » To promote food safety keeping in mind sustainability and respect for the environment.
- » To develop strategies and actions to facilitate access to healthier diets and lifestyles, in order to prevent obesity and overweight and to help reduce health inequality.
- » To provide objective and high-quality information to consumers and other interested parties.

Within the field of food safety, AESAN offers guarantees and objective information to consumers and to all involved stakeholders, including economic operators in the Spanish agri-food sector. It also coordinates food inspections conducted by different public administrations. It is also in charge of publishing alerts about hazardous foods through the Coordinated System for the Rapid Exchange of Information (SCIRI in Spanish). This food alert network is active 24 hours a day / 7 days a week, coordinating actions at the national, European, as well as international level.

In the area of nutrition, it has developed the NAOS strategy (Nutrition, Physical Activity and Prevention of Obesity) which promotes and coordinates policies and initiatives to encourage the adoption of healthy diets and physical activity, fostering educational and informative activities aimed at consumers. It seeks to facilitate public access to healthier options and environments, with the goal of preventing obesity, especially in childhood and thus reduce health inequality.

The Agency is also Spain’s point of contact with European and global institutions in matters of food safety and nutrition, highlighting its role in developing food-based regulation and its interpretation.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The activity of the Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition (AESAN) in 2020 has been characterised by the publication of *Royal Decree 495/2020 of 28 April, developing the basic institutional structure of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and amending Royal Decree 139/2020 of 28 January, which establishes the basic institutional structure of the ministry departments*, and by the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The approval of Royal Decree 495/2020 entailed a change in the institutional affiliation of the Agency, from being the exclusive purview of the Ministry of Health to which it had been institutionally affiliated since its inception, to the recently-created Ministry of Consumer Affairs and more concretely, to the General Secretariat of Consumer Affairs and Gaming, which assumed the Presidency of the body.

Likewise, the seventh additional provision of the Royal Decree establishes that AESAN will be functionally dependent on the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, and the Ministry of Health through the General Secretariat for Health; and on the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food through the General Secretariat for Agriculture and Food, within the scope of their respective powers. This triple functional dependency of AESAN has been made concrete with the creation and regulation of the Commission for Inter-Ministry Coordination in 2021, the year of publication of this report. This new functional affiliation to three different ministry departments will result in a holistic vision of the issues related to food safety and healthy nutrition, and additionally, be beneficial to all consumers.

The outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has had a decisive effect on the Agency's activity in 2020. Even though the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and other renowned scientific bodies concluded that there was no evidence that foodstuffs could be a source or means of transmission of this coronavirus, it must be acknowledged that this pandemic exerted significant pressure on food systems as well as on the AESAN's daily work, with different mechanisms being activated to ensure food safety and in general, to continue working as usual so that people could access foods without risks and of a high nutritional quality.

The traditional on-site provision of services was affected by the restrictions imposed by the decreed state of Emergency and remote working from the staff's homes had to be immediately implemented. At no time were any of its functions neglected, and certain units such as the National Food Centre were able to maintain some of their essential on-site activities as the national reference laboratory for food analysis.

Within this context, consumers had numerous questions regarding the virus and foods, whether the virus could be transmitted via packaging, or through water, the role of pets in transmission, how to wash foods at home, or whether to use the dishwasher. For these reasons, the Agency website created a section dedicated to COVID-19 and food safety, where a large number of documents drafted by different official authorities offering rigorous, scientific and useful information for the general population and persons interested in the food chain were available for consultation.

This report lists the activities conducted in the Agency in 2020, divided into 5 sections: FOOD SAFETY; NUTRITION: foods and healthy and sustainable diets; COORDINATION AND TRANSPARENCY; IMPROVED MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES, greater protection, and finally, BETTER COMMUNICATION FOR ALL. This year, the report includes this Executive Summary as a new step for easier reading.

### Science as the pillar for decision-making in food safety

In 2020, the AESAN Scientific Committee approved seven reports that were published on our website:

- » Report on the appropriateness of the additional hygiene requirements applicable to raw milk for direct sale to the end-consumer.
- » Report on the safe use of three aqueous solutions of hydrogen peroxide, acetic acid and peracetic acid as processing aids for the bacterial disinfection of water for treating citrus fruits and peppers in processing plants.
- » Report on the Impact of Consumption of "Ultra-processed Foods" on the Health of Consumers.
- » Report on the application of the Nutri-Score nutritional labelling system of foods in Spain.
- » Reviewed and updated report on Dietary Recommendations for the Spanish population.
- » Report on the sample size of poultry and lagomorphs that may be considered representative for post-mortem inspection in slaughterhouses.
- » Report on the risk associated with the consumption of food supplements that contain curcumin as an ingredient.

Moreover, its joint work with the European Food Safety Authority continued to grow ever stronger and to better publicise its activities, AESAN, as the Focal Point of the EFSA in Spain, created an [informative video](#) in 2020 introducing the institution to all interested parties.

#### Food legislation as a basic tool to guarantee safe foods.

This year, AESAN has participated in procedures relating to 69 EU regulations. Within the national scope, a noteworthy activity was the publication of [Royal Decree 1086/2020](#), regulating and making flexible certain conditions for the application of EU provisions with regard to hygiene in the production and marketing of food products and regulating activities excluded from their scope of application, at the initiative of this Agency and the Ministry of Consumer Affairs. This regulation promotes local consumption, thus contributing to preserving traditions, biodiversity and regional products, boosting the viability of small-scale food producers and helping to prevent the depopulation of the rural environment. To spread awareness regarding the publication of this regulation, different materials were developed and published (video and infographics) under the title "[Alimentos cercanos y seguros](#)" (Nearby and Safe Foods).

To achieve the harmonised interpretation of this regulation across the entire State territory, 11 interpretive notes and 24 documents on guidelines, procedures or national plans were additionally drafted during this period, and approved by the AESAN Institutional Commission.

During 2020, and especially by virtual means, AESAN participated in 150 national-level meetings and 277 international meetings where it represented Spain, above all in the European Commission.

#### Databases for correct risk management

The General Health Registry for Food Companies and Foods was, one year ago, the most-visited section of the website and a reflection of the work performed by numerous parties involved in the food chain. To quote but a few data from the year, AESAN handled 10,070 procedures for new industries and up to 2,517 food products were entered into this database.

To make it simpler to browse all the information that is processed, AESAN has developed three new search engines:

- [A search engine for nutrition and health claims](#) so that consumers and all interested parties have a tool that is easy to use, intuitive and versatile that helps them to be aware of nutrition and health claims that are listed in foods marketed in this country. This helps them to know which ones are authorised, under what conditions, as well as safety warnings whenever applicable.

- [A search engine for food supplements and foods for specific population groups](#), containing information until now only accessible to the competent authorities and which, in the interests of greater transparency, provides citizens with information from the General Health Registry for Food Companies and Foods.
- [A search engine for Scientific Committee reports](#) in order to facilitate browsing its 118 reports published until 2020. The search engine has Spanish and English versions and uses the key words specified in each report.

#### Controlled Foods

Towards the end of the year, the *National Plan for Official Control of the Food Chain (PNCOCA) 2021-2025* was approved. This Plan is the framework document that describes the official controls conducted in Spain by different competent authorities at the national, regional and local levels, in order to guarantee regulatory compliance throughout the food chain, from primary production to the points of sale to end-consumers. It is an integral document, in coordination with 4 different ministries, autonomous regions, autonomous cities and municipalities outlining food control for the next 5 years.

As a result of this control, the Agency drafted and published last year the "*Annual Report on the National Plan for Official Control of the Food Chain in Spain 2019*", which included information on the results of the controls conducted by the competent authorities, inspections and tests conducted according to the PNCOCA; the type and number of non-compliances with the legislation; and the measures adopted to guarantee the effective functioning of the national plan.

Throughout 2020, the Food Alert Network continued its activity 24 hours daily /7 days a week. Through the Coordinated System for the Rapid Exchange of Information (SCIRI), a total of 633 casefiles on food products involving Spain were handled, of which 256 corresponded to alerts, 166 to informative publications, 103 to border rejections of products, and 8 to cases marked as "various".

Overall, it must be pointed out that there has been a 21.5% increase in the number of casefiles linked to alerts, compared to 2019. 46% were due to hazards detected in plant-based products, 37% in animal-based products, 12% in the "other products" group; and 5% corresponded to food contact materials.

Within the category of hazards, chemical hazard alerts accounted for 51%, followed by biological hazard alerts at 24%. Physical hazards accounted for 5% of the total. Finally, 20% of the cases were filed under "other hazards" such as undeclared allergens or the presence of prohibited substances in products marketed as food supplements. Regarding the communication of food alerts, 46 publications were made on the [AESAN website](#). Additionally, the [SCIRI report for 2019](#) has been published.

