

Notice to retailers: Plastic containers or utensils containing bamboo

Businesses are being told that they should not be selling plastic containers or utensils which contain bamboo and other plant-based materials, for example rice husks, wheat straw and hemp.

The Food Standards Agency is also encouraging retailers and other businesses to respond to a call for evidence, launched today, to help determine the long-term safety of food contact materials which contain bamboo and similar plant-based materials in the UK. Until these products have been fully assessed and authorised, they will not be able to remain on the market, and products currently on the market should be withdrawn.

An initial assessment of the risks presented by food contact plastics with added bamboo has been carried out by the Committee on Toxicity (COT), the independent group of scientists which provides advice to the FSA and other government departments and agencies on matters concerning the toxicity of chemicals.

The COT determined that, in some cases, the presence of bamboo and similar plant-based matter in plastic materials could result in the migration of the plastic components, such as formaldehyde or melamine, into food or drink above their legal limit. Whilst it is very unlikely that the initial use of these products would result in an immediate health risk, the long-term impacts from regular use of such items remains uncertain due to a lack of evidence.

As a result of this initial assessment, consumers are being advised – as a precautionary measure – that they should not use such products until a full study into the potential risks can be completed. This is expected to be concluded after the call for evidence closes and is dependent on businesses providing the FSA with the necessary evidence on the safety of these products.

Extra caution should be taken to avoid using the utensils or containers to eat and drink hot and acidic foods and drinks, or to place them in the microwave, as this may make it more likely that elevated amounts of harmful chemicals will be released.

Commonly identified products made using plastic containing bamboo and similar materials include reusable drinking cups; tableware and cutlery; lunchboxes; and chopping boards. Additional products include plates, bowls, and cups including some specifically marketed as crockery sets to infants and children.

“At this time, we do not know if there is a safety concern with using these articles on a regular basis, but we know that using with hot and acidic foods – or use of a microwave – could cause elevated amounts of chemicals to be released.

“We want businesses to provide us with as much information on these products as they can, including details of what tests have been carried out on them and how exactly they are being made.

“The call for evidence will enable the FSA to improve our understanding of these products, particularly concerning how varying the ratio of plastic to plant-based material impacts the long-term stability and overall risk.”

Natasha Smithm, FSA deputy director of food policy

The FSA’s advice does not apply to items made solely from bamboo or plant-based materials, only those products which use a combination of plastic and plant filler. Retailers are being asked to take care to check that any bamboo or similar-plant products remaining on sale do not contain any plastic components and to ensure that they meet the applicable national regulations.

It may be difficult to tell whether a product is made from a bamboo-composite material once it has been removed from its packaging, but products will have a smooth surface and have the feel of plastic. Some products may have a recognisable logo which will help consumers to check whether it is an implicated article.

If in doubt, the FSA advises not to use the product until the full risk assessment has been completed.

For more details and to respond to the call for evidence, please see our [Call for Evidence: Plastic food contact materials containing bamboo and similar plant-based material as additives](#).

Our Call for Evidence closes on 12 December 2023.