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FDA Moves to Ban Red No. 40, Yellow No. 5, and Six Other Food Dyes by End of 2026

Citing potential health concerns, especially in children, the FDA will phase out eight synthetic dyes used in food and medicine and fast-track safer natural alternatives, marking a major shift in U.S. food safety policy under the Trump administration.

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Close-up of multicolored sweet and sour gummy bear candy. FDA has announced a plan to eliminate eight petroleum-based synthetic food dyes, including those commonly used in candies, by the end of 2026. By. GETTY IMAGES

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, under the leadership of newly appointed Commissioner Dr. Marty Makary, revealed a sweeping plan on Tuesday to eliminate eight petroleum-based

synthetic food dyes from the nation's food and medication supply by the end of 2026. The announcement, made alongside Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., marks a significant step in the Trump administration's "Make America Healthy Again" initiative, which aims to address chronic health issues through food safety reforms.

The FDA's initiative targets eight specific synthetic dyes: Red No. 40 (Allura Red AC), Yellow No. 5 (Tartrazine), Yellow No. 6 (Sunset Yellow FCF), Blue No. 1 (Brilliant Blue FCF), Blue No. 2 (Indigo Carmine), Green No. 3 (Fast Green FCF), Citrus Red No. 2, and Orange B. These dyes, derived from petroleum, are widely used in American food products, from candies to baked goods and pharmaceuticals. The agency currently authorizes 36 color additives, including these eight synthetic dyes, with the remaining additives derived from natural sources like vegetables.

"For too long, some food producers have been feeding Americans petroleum-based chemicals without their knowledge or consent," Kennedy said in a release from the Department of Health and Human Services. The move to phase out these dyes comes amid growing concerns about their potential health impacts, particularly on children. Some studies, including a 2021 report from the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, suggest that synthetic dyes may contribute to neurobehavioral issues such as hyperactivity and attention deficits in some children, though the FDA has stated that no causal relationship has been definitively established.

Dr. Makary, a Johns Hopkins surgeon and vocal critic of the U.S. food system, outlined the FDA's strategy during a press conference. The agency will establish clear industry standards and timelines to guide manufacturers in transitioning to natural color alternatives. In the coming weeks, the FDA will revoke approval for any synthetic dyes no longer in production and begin the process of removing the remaining dyes from the market. Additionally, the agency plans to fast-track the review of four natural dyes—calcium phosphate, Galdieria extract blue, gardenia blue, and butterfly pea flower extract, which range in shades from deep purple to bright blue and has already been approved by the FDA.

The announcement follows earlier FDA action in January 2025, when the agency declared that Red No. 3, a dye linked to cancer in laboratory animals, would be banned by 2028. The decision to accelerate the removal of the eight additional dyes reflects the administration's urgency to reform food safety regulations. "These steps that we are taking means that the FDA is effectively removing all petroleum-based food dyes from the U.S. food supply," Makary stated, emphasizing the agency's commitment to prioritizing public health.

The initiative has sparked varied reactions. Public health advocates, who have long called for stricter regulation of synthetic additives, view the move as a positive step. Marion Nestle, professor emerita of nutrition at New York University, noted that dyes serve no nutritional purpose beyond aesthetics and that other countries have already restricted or banned them. "The dyes serve no purpose for food beyond cosmetics," Nestle said, referencing regulations in Canada and Europe that require warning labels on foods containing artificial colors.

However, the food industry faces significant challenges in reformulating products to comply with the new standards within the two-year timeline. Jerold Mande, a former FDA senior adviser and adjunct professor at Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health, acknowledged that while the timeline is ambitious, it is feasible. "It will meet some resistance," Mande said, "but since companies already eliminate these additives in other countries, I don't expect a big fight." Hours before the announcement, the International Dairy Foods Association stated that its members would voluntarily eliminate artificial colors in milk, cheese, and yogurt products sold to U.S. school meal programs by July 2026, noting that most dairy products for schools already avoid

these additives.

The FDA's plan aligns with a broader movement to restrict synthetic dyes. States like California and West Virginia have recently passed laws banning certain artificial dyes from school meals, with West Virginia's ban extending to all foods sold in the state by January 2028. These state-level efforts, coupled with Kennedy's pledge to eliminate all artificial dyes by the end of his term, underscore the growing momentum for reform.

The announcement also reflects Makary's broader vision for the FDA, which he articulated during his Senate confirmation hearing in March 2025. A pancreatic surgeon and author of three best-selling books on healthcare, Makary has criticized the overprescribing of drugs, pesticide use, and the influence of pharmaceutical and insurance companies. His nomination by President Donald Trump in November 2024 drew mixed reactions due to his past opposition to Covid-19 vaccine mandates and statements about natural immunity. However, Makary's supporters, including some public health experts, see him as a potential bridge between the administration's agenda and mainstream science.

If confirmed, Makary will oversee an agency with an 18,000-strong workforce and a \$7 billion budget, responsible for regulating not only food but also drugs, medical devices, vaccines, cosmetics, and tobacco products. His financial disclosures, filed ahead of his confirmation hearing, revealed ties to health tech and medical device startups, from which he pledged to divest if confirmed. Makary's leadership will also navigate ongoing FDA projects, including a reorganization of its food division initiated by outgoing Commissioner Robert Califf.

The phase-out of petroleum-based dyes is expected to reshape the food industry, with manufacturers likely turning to natural alternatives already in use globally. While the FDA has not established a definitive link between dyes and behavioral issues, the agency continues to monitor research. The decision to act now, Makary and Kennedy emphasized, prioritizes precaution and public trust in the food supply.