

Press release

Viruses in food: a new national reference mandate for ANSES's Laboratory for Food Safety

ANSES's Laboratory for Food Safety in Maisons-Alfort has just been appointed National Reference Laboratory for the detection of "foodborne viruses in foodstuffs of animal origin excluding shellfish". This new mandate, which is a major step forward in strengthening public health regarding foodborne viruses, adds to the 13 national and two European mandates already held by this laboratory. This new mission further strengthens ANSES's commitment to addressing major health issues.

Viral infections are recognised as being among the main food-related diseases in humans. For example, in France, it is currently estimated that 400,000 cases of infection with norovirus and around 50,000 cases of hepatitis E virus can be attributed to food. These viral diseases remain a major public health issue.

Enteric viruses can be transmitted by contact but also via the ingestion of contaminated food or water. The main viruses of interest are those responsible for hepatitis (hepatitis A virus, hepatitis E virus) and gastroenteritis (norovirus, rotavirus, etc.). Enteric viruses are highly resistant and persist in the environment (mainly through contamination of water). Food can be contaminated at various stages of the food chain: livestock farming, crop growing (through irrigation), harvest, and then during the packaging, preparation or sale of food.

Since 2003, the Laboratory for Food Safety, which specialises in contaminants found in foodstuffs, has been developing methods to detect these viruses in the main at-risk foods, enabling it to play a part in European standardisation work. This work contributed to the 2017 publication of the NF EN ISO 15216-1 Standard, which defines the reference method for quantifying hepatitis A virus and norovirus in the main at-risk foods (water, plant products, red fruits, shellfish). The laboratory also works on characterising the infectivity of viral particles found in food in order to improve viral risk assessment in the food field.

New recognition at national level

This new mission supplements the laboratory's existing reference activities, particularly regarding its 13 national and two European reference mandates. The reference mission involves developing, updating and distributing reliable detection and quantification methods, for the robust testing of foods with a view to protecting consumers.

National reference activities concerning viruses in food are shared in France: Ifremer specialises in viruses in shellfish, the Montpellier Laboratory of the Ministry of the Economy's Joint Laboratory Service in viruses in plant-based foods, and ANSES in viruses in foodstuffs of animal origin excluding shellfish.

The awarding of this new national reference mandate for viruses in food again testifies to the quality of the work of ANSES's Laboratory for Food Safety and its continuing commitment to food safety.