

**For discussion
on 5 November 2001**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

MONITORING THE CHEMICAL CONTENTS OF HAIRY CRABS

PURPOSE

Recent reports in the press about the alleged finding of antibiotics including chloramphenicol and oxytetracycline in hairy crabs imported from the Mainland for sale on the local market have aroused public concern on whether hairy crabs are safe for consumption. This paper explains the Administration's surveillance programme on the monitoring of chemical contents in hairy crabs and the related risk assessment.

BACKGROUND

2. Under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance(Cap. 132), all foods for sale in Hong Kong have to be fit for human consumption. In order to safeguard public health, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has put in place a risk-based food surveillance programme. Samples of foods are taken at the import, wholesale and retail levels for testing with a view to ensuring that foods for sale on the market comply with the legal requirements. The number and category of food sampled are based on risk assessment. Food samples are taken for the testing of a range of antibiotics including chloramphenicol and oxytetracycline. Since 1998, more than a thousand food samples have been taken for such testing. Chloramphenicol and oxytetracycline were not found in any of the seafood samples tested.

IMMEDIATE FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

3. FEHD is very concerned about the press reports on antibiotics found in hairy crabs and has taken immediate follow-up actions. The staff of FEHD conducted an extensive food surveillance exercise and took samples of hairy crabs at the import, wholesale and retail levels for chemical analyses. The results of the first batch of samples will be available within a week. We have also informed the State General Administration of the People's Republic of China for Quality Supervision and Inspection and Quarantine of the press

report and the actions we have taken, and will maintain close contact with them. We will take appropriate follow-up actions based on our laboratory results.

RISK ASSESSMENT

4. Although a range of antibiotics and veterinary chemicals can be used in food animals, feeders should follow good husbandry practices when using them. Inappropriate use of antibiotics may result in undesirable side effects harmful to human health. It may even facilitate the development of antibiotic resistance in the long run and undermine the effectiveness of antibiotics. As a result, ferocious bacteria may find a chance to invade the human body and become more difficult to kill. As such, antibiotics of stronger efficacy have to be used.

5. The occurrence of side effects from intaking antibiotics is in general related to the dosage, duration of intake and repeated use. The most serious but rare side effect of chloramphenicol is bone marrow damage, resulting in severe anaemia. Prolonged use of oxytetracycline may hamper embryonic skeletal development and cause discolouration of teeth in children. Judging from the chloramphenicol and oxytetracycline level in hairy crabs as alleged in the press reports, from a risk assessment perspective, most people consuming not an excessive amount of hairy crabs will be exposed to a very low risk.

6. Generally speaking, the public should maintain a balanced diet and eat with moderation as a risk reduction measure. Children, pregnant women and patients with chronic illness should be particularly careful in choosing food.

CONCLUSION

7. The newly enacted Public Health (Animals and Birds) (Chemical Residues) Regulation aims at enhancing the control over the use of chemicals in food animals. Chloramphenicol is one of the prohibited chemicals under the Regulation. Consequential amendments have also been made to the Harmful Substances in Food Regulations under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance. The Administration will continue to maintain vigilance in monitoring the chemical contents in foods to ensure that the foods meet the territory's stringent food safety standards and are fit for human consumption.

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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