

**For information on
25 May 2004**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Monitoring of Chemical Levels in Mung Bean Vermicelli
and Other Food Products**

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the recent incident of mung bean vermicelli containing chemicals and our monitoring programme on chemicals in food products.

BACKGROUND

2. There were recent media reports in the Mainland that certain chemicals had been used by a number of factories for whitening the "Longkou" mung bean vermicelli produced in the Shandong Province. The chemicals mentioned in the press reports, namely ammonium hydroxide, benzoyl peroxide and ammonium hydrogen carbonate are food additives used in food processing. Benzoyl peroxide is commonly used as a flour treatment agent, and ammonium hydrogen carbonate is used in food, e.g. bakery products, as raising agent.

3. The Joint Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organisation Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) has evaluated the safety of these additives and considered that these additives are safe to be used in food. According to international authorities and studies, there is inadequate evidence that these chemicals cause cancer in human.

ACTION TAKEN

4. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) maintains close liaison with the relevant Mainland authorities in respect of food safety

matters. In case of food safety incidents affecting the food exported to Hong Kong, the Mainland authorities would alert Hong Kong. Moreover, depending on the nature of the matter, FEHD will also actively contact the Mainland authorities. After the incident of mung bean vermicelli was reported by the media, FEHD immediately contacted the State General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of the Mainland (AQSIQ). Information provided by AQSIQ suggested that the products concerned were not for export. FEHD separately inspected more than 100 retail outlets and no "Longkou" mung bean vermicelli from the affected factories was found. A total of 21 samples of mung bean vermicelli were sent for laboratory testing. The results indicated that none of them contain excessive amounts of the chemicals as reported by the media. One sample was found to contain an amount of sulphur dioxide exceeding the legal limit. FEHD has asked the retailers to stop selling this particular brand of mung bean vermicelli.

FOOD SAFETY CONTROL

5. The food safety control framework in Hong Kong consists of several main components, including food safety legislation, safety control of imported food, food surveillance and risk assessment. On the legislation aspect, the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132) stipulates that all food on sale must be wholesome, unadulterated and fit for human consumption. In addition, there is a set of subsidiary legislations stipulating the standards for specific food products, such as game, meat and poultry. Based on the assessed risk level of the food items, pre-approval would be required before such items could be imported to Hong Kong. Health certificates issued by the relevant health authorities are required for importation of live animals and poultry or their meat products.

6. Under FEHD's routine food surveillance programme, food samples are collected at import, manufacture, wholesale and retail stages of the food supply chain for laboratory testing. Priority is given to sampling the following food categories –

- (a) food with specific standards stipulated in the law;
- (b) food connected with previous food poisoning or other food safety

incidents;

- (c) food manufactured by or sold in previously convicted food premises; and
- (d) food under complaint by the public, or food of public concern.

7. Sampling priority is under constant review, taking into account latest overseas and local risk analyses. Chemical, microbiological and/or radioactivity analyses are conducted on food samples based on their inherent risks. In 2003, about 53 000 samples were taken for analysis, out of which 34 000 were for chemical testing. The overall failure rate was 0.3%, which compared favourably with 0.5% and 0.3% in 2001 and 2002 respectively, indicating that the standard of food safety is maintained at a high level in Hong Kong.

8. In addition to routine surveillance, FEHD conducts topical risk assessment studies using food surveillance results and data from special surveys. These risk assessment studies include studies on special food hazards of public health concern, such as "acrylamide in food", "dietary exposure to heavy metals and dioxins of secondary schools students" and "3-MCPD in soy sauce and condiments", as well as studies on high risk food items such as salad, siu-mei and lo-mei, and ice-cream. The results of risk assessment provide scientific basis for prioritizing food safety issues of public health concern, communicating risk to the public and the trade and advising them the ways to reduce the risks.

9. While it would be ideal if a food safety monitoring programme can cover all food commodities and related hazards so as to provide the public with complete certainty about the safety of food available in the market, in reality, it is not practicable nor cost effective to do so because it is not feasible for the food authority to pre-test every food item before they are put out for sale in the market. Adopting a risk-based approach in designing a food surveillance programme is more sensible and the surveillance programme can serve as a risk management tool more cost effectively. This approach is also in line with international practices.

10. On the other hand, we conduct regular reviews of the current legislation and regulations in Hong Kong to enhance food safety for the protection of public health and consumer interest. We have just amended the Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations (Cap. 132 sub. leg. W) requiring that

food labels should declare, among other things, the presence of eight types of substances which are known to cause allergy in some individuals, and the name or functional class of the food additive used. The improvement of the food labelling regulation will enhance the consumers' knowledge on the composition of the food to be consumed. We are now taking steps to introduce a nutrition labelling scheme in Hong Kong to facilitate consumers in making healthy food choices and regulate misleading or deceptive labels and claims.

WAY FORWARD

11. Food safety is a tripartite responsibility among the Government, the trade and consumers. As part of our ongoing efforts to protect public health, we shall continue to monitor the level of chemicals in food. Regular review of the food legislation will be conducted to identify areas for improvement. We will also maintain close liaison with the Mainland authorities to ensure that food items imported into Hong Kong are safe for human consumption.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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