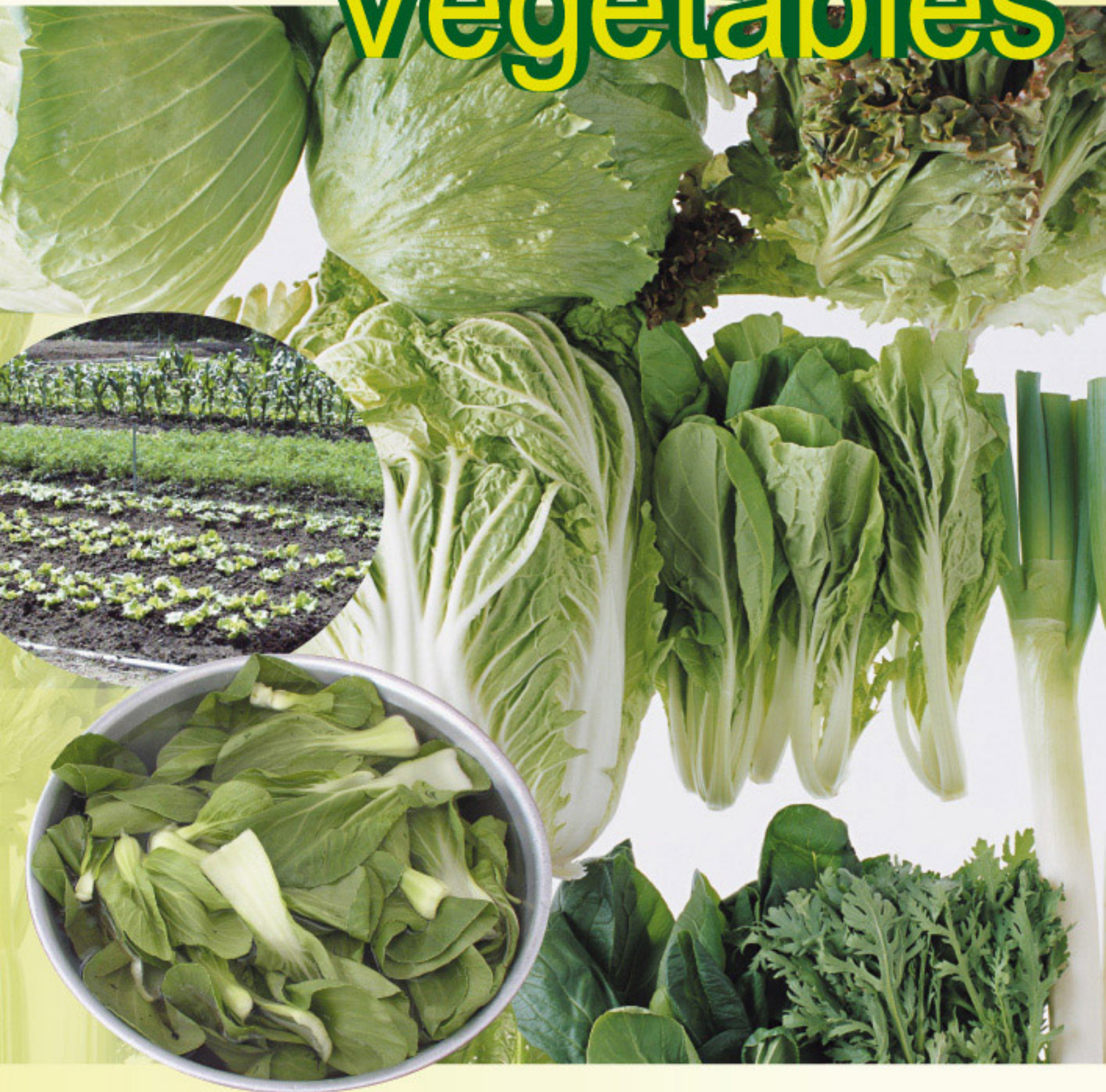


Proper Handling of Vegetables



食物安全中心
Centre for Food Safety

Vegetables are essential in a balanced diet. They are good sources of dietary fibres, vitamins and minerals. Vegetables help promoting gastrointestinal health and reducing the risk of certain chronic diseases, such as cancers and cardiovascular diseases.

Pesticides are substances used to kill or control unwanted insects, plants, fungi, rodents or other pests. Insecticides, herbicides, rodenticides and fungicides are some commonly used pesticides. Proper use of pesticide on vegetables can reduce crop damage by insect pests and fungi, reduce soil erosion upon the removal of weeds, as well as increase the crop yield. Consumers' health and living quality are thereby enhanced with the provision of a large variety of pest and disease free, safe and wholesome vegetables at reasonable price. However, if pesticide is used improperly, consumers may ingest excessive amount of pesticide residue, which may affect their health.

Pesticide residue present in vegetables may be resulted from:

- direct or excessive use of pesticide on vegetables;
- insufficient time allowed for the breakdown of pesticide to a safe level before harvesting; or
- environmental contamination.

Symptoms of an acute pesticide poisoning include vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, dizziness and numbness. In severe cases, the victims may even have difficulties in breathing, blurred vision and convulsion; while a chronic poisoning may damage the nervous system or other organs such as the liver and kidneys. Some pesticides may be transferred to an embryo via the placenta or to a baby via breast feeding, thereby affecting their development.

Pesticide residual problems are more commonly seen in leafy vegetables such as Chinese flowering cabbage, Chinese lettuce, Indian lettuce, watercress and cauliflower.



Monitoring and Control of Vegetables on Sale in Hong Kong

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) operates a food surveillance programme and regularly takes samples of vegetables at import, wholesale and retail levels for testing.

Most of the vegetables on sale in Hong Kong come from the Mainland. All vegetables imported from the Mainland must come from registered farms or purchasing stations under the supervision of the Mainland monitoring authorities. CFS has a Food Control Office at Man Kam To. When the vegetables reach Man Kam To, the CFS will inspect relevant documents including the Pesticide Declaration Certificate, Monitoring Card, etc. Random samples of vegetables will also be collected for testing of pesticide residues at the Man Kam To Food Laboratory whenever necessary.

In addition, the CFS also collects vegetable samples at the wholesale and retail levels for the test of pesticide residue by the Government Laboratory. Furthermore, vegetable samples will also be collected and tested for heavy metals.

The CFS currently takes reference from the Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) recommended by Codex Alimentarius Commission in determining whether vegetables contain excessive pesticide residue.

MRL is the maximum concentration of a pesticide residue permitted in a food commodity when the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) is observed. According to the GAP, one should apply only the minimum amount of approved pesticide necessary to control pest, thereby protecting the health of consumers. The primary aims of setting MRLs for pesticides in food are to safeguard public health and to provide an indicator for the trade.

Foods containing pesticides below MRLs are considered wholesome and fit for human consumption. However, pesticide residue level exceeding the MRL does not necessarily mean that there is an immediate health risk. There is no cause for undue alarm. An excess in the pesticide residual level reflects an improper use of pesticide or a contamination of the vegetables, which requires rectification at the sources.



Advice to the Public

1. To reduce the health risk of pesticide residue due to consumption of pesticide-tainted vegetables, members of the public can wash vegetables well in clean running water for several times; then soak them in water for one hour or blanch them in boiling water for one minute and discard the water. Both measures can be adopted together for further risk reduction.
2. Concerned individuals, who wish to further reduce their intake of pesticides, may remove the outer leaves or peel the vegetables.
3. Members of the public are advised to take a balanced diet and eat a variety of vegetables to avoid excessive exposure to certain contaminants from a small range of food items.
4. One should seek medical advice if feeling unwell after eating vegetables.



Advice to the Trade

When using pesticide, farmers should follow the GAP which includes:

- use only approved pesticides;
- apply only the minimum amount of pesticide necessary to control pest;
- do not harvest vegetables within two weeks after the last pesticide treatment.

For any enquiry, please call the FEHD's hotline 2868 0000.