
Targeted food surveillance – Preservatives in preserved fruits and vegetables

Centre for Food Safety

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

January 2012

Background

- Preservatives (e.g. sulphur dioxide, benzoic acid and sorbic acid) are commonly used in preserving fruits and vegetables.
- The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) notes that there had been levels of excessive preservatives detected in samples of preserved fruits and vegetables.
- In view of this, a targeted food surveillance project conducted by the CFS is continued in 2011 to assess the situation.

Types of samples

- The CFS collected 450 samples for testing from October to November 2011.
- Types of samples
 - preserved vegetables (such as cucumber, radish, leaf mustard, rakkyo, ginger and chilies)
 - preserved fruits (such as dried mango, dried pineapple, raisin, apricots, plums, dried apple ring, sour peach and olives)
- Testing items
 - preservatives (including sulphur dioxide, benzoic acid, sorbic acid and parabens)

Unsatisfactory samples

- There was only 1 unsatisfactory food sample. The overall satisfactory rate was 99.8%.

Sample	Unsatisfactory testing item	Result
1 preserved fruit (dried raisins)*	Sulphur dioxide	3110 ppm ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ The level exceeded the legal limit (1500 ppm). Sulphur dioxide is of low toxicity and normal consumption of the sample will not cause adverse health effects. Individuals who are allergic to this preservative may experience symptoms such as shortness of breath, headache and nausea.

* The result has been announced in the Food Safety Report for November 2011.

Follow up actions

- Trace source of food items in question.
- Request the vendors concerned to stop sale and dispose of incriminated food items.
- Issue warning letters to the vendors concerned.
- Take follow-up samples for analysis.
- Take prosecution actions if there is sufficient evidence.

Advice for the trade

- Use of preservatives is regulated under the Preservatives in Food Regulation, Cap.132 BD. The maximum penalty for conviction is a fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for 6 months.
- Adhere to Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) and comply with the legal requirements when using preservatives.
- Source food and ingredients from reliable sources.
- Maintain a good recording system to allow source tracing if needed.
- The Food Safety Ordinance is now effective. Upon the expiry of the grace period by 31 January 2012, any person who does not register but carries on a food importation or distribution business; or fails to comply with the record-keeping requirement commits an offence.

Advice for consumers

- Patronize reliable retailers.
- Take a balanced diet so as to avoid excessive intake of certain harmful substances as a result of frequent consumption of a small range of food items.