

Targeted Food Surveillance – Sulphur Dioxide in Meat (2nd Phase)

Centre for Food Safety

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

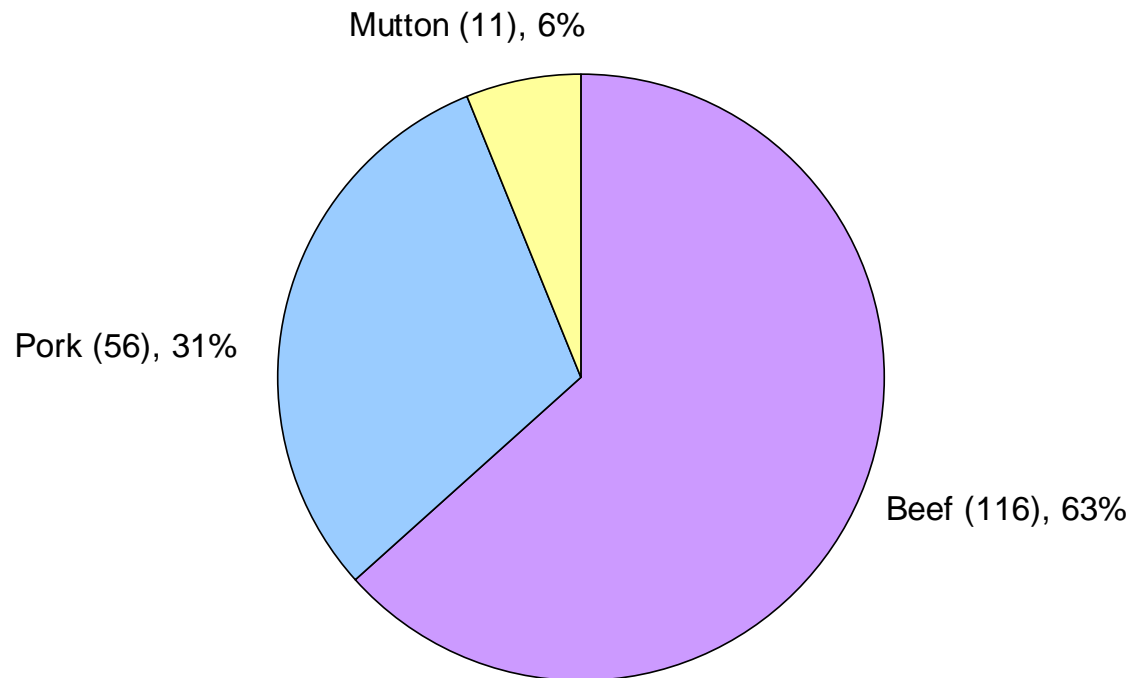
November 2011

Background

- Sulphur dioxide is a commonly used preservative in a variety of foods including dried fruits, pickled vegetables and sausages. However, under the law, sulphur dioxide is not permitted in fresh, chilled or frozen meat.
- Given the perishable nature of meat, individual meat traders had been found to use sulphur dioxide against the law so as to make the colour of meat apparently fresher.
- The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has repeatedly detected meat samples containing sulphur dioxide in recent years. The targeted food surveillance is continued to divide into two phases this year to assess the use of sulphur dioxide in meat. This presentation gives an account of the sample analyses in the second phase.

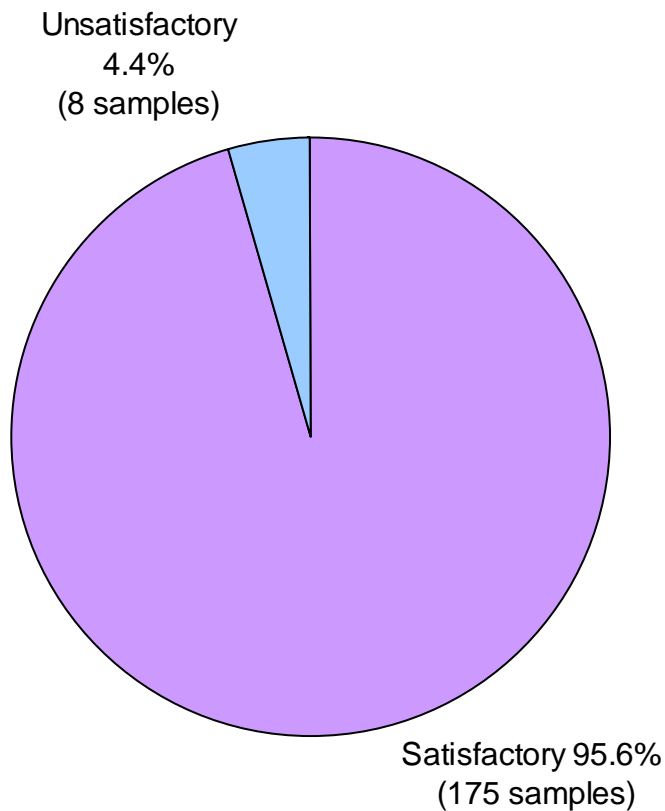
Types of meat samples tested

- The CFS collected 183 samples for testing of sulphur dioxide from September to October.
- The sampling locations have covered the meat stalls which have previous records of selling meat containing sulphur dioxide.



Overall results

- Overall satisfactory rate was 95.6%.



Unsatisfactory samples

- There were 8 fresh beef samples found to contain sulphur dioxide at levels between 33 and 1500 ppm.
- Totally 8 meat stalls were involved. Of which, 5 were repeated offenders.

Follow-up actions

- Issue warning letters to the vendors concerned.
- Take follow-up samples for analysis.
- Take prosecution actions if there is sufficient evidence.
- Monitor the situation closely.

Advice for the trade

- Comply with the law and should not use sulphur dioxide in fresh, chilled or frozen meat.
- Under the Preservatives in Food Regulation (Cap. 132, sub. leg.), selling fresh, chilled or frozen meat containing sulphur dioxide is an offence and the maximum penalty is a fine of \$50,000 and 6 months' imprisonment. Upon conviction, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department will impose the penalty of suspension or cancellation of the concerned licence according to the “Demerit Points System”.
- For public market stall owners, their tenancies might be terminated.

Advice for consumers

- Sulphur dioxide is a food preservative of low toxicity. It is also water-soluble and most of it tends to be removed through washing and cooking. Based on the detected levels, adverse health effects is unlikely upon normal consumption.
- For susceptible individuals who are allergic to sulphur dioxide, they may experience breathing difficulty, headache and nausea.
- Purchase meat from reliable market stalls or fresh provision shops.
- Do not buy or consume meat which is unnaturally red.
- Take a balanced diet so as to avoid excessive exposure to food preservatives from a small range of food items.