

Seasonal Food Surveillance — Lunar New Year Food

Centre for Food Safety

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

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Background

- The Lunar New Year is coming soon and many people would like to enjoy festive foods with their family members and friends in this festival.
- The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) recently conducted a seasonal food surveillance project on Lunar New Year food. The objective was to provide information on the safety of Lunar New Year food to consumers and the trade in a timely manner.



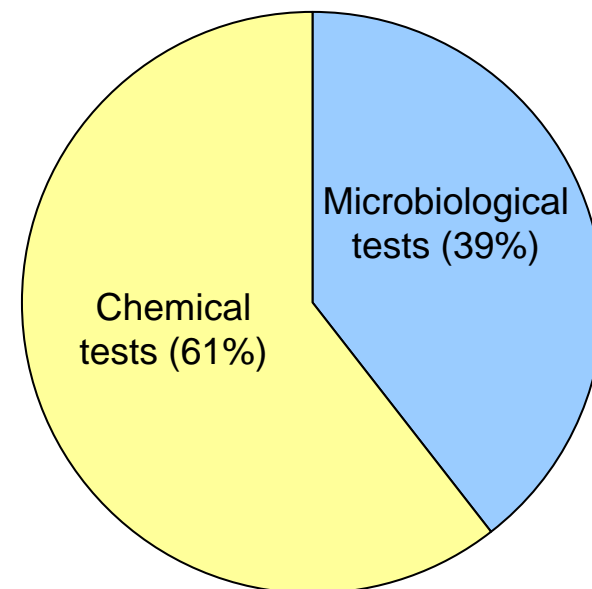
Types of food samples

- The CFS collected 634 food samples for testing. Types of food included steamed puddings (e.g. turnip pudding, festive cake), fried dumplings (e.g. sesame balls, crispy triangles), candied fruits and vegetables, glutinous rice balls, seeds, dried vegetables, dried aquatic products and Chinese preserved meat.



Types of analysis

- **Microbiological tests included**
 - total bacterial counts
 - pathogens (e.g. *Salmonella*, *Clostridium perfringens*, *Bacillus cereus*, *Staphylococcus aureus*)
- **Chemical tests covered**
 - preservatives (e.g. sulphur dioxide, benzoic acid, formaldehyde)
 - colouring matters (e.g. Sudan dyes)
 - antioxidants
 - metallic contamination (e.g. cadmium, mercury, arsenic, etc.)
 - toxins (e.g. aflatoxin)



N.B.: Figures in brackets are rounded and may not add up to total due to rounding.

Overall results

- Eight of the 634 samples were unsatisfactory. Overall satisfactory rate was 98.7%.

Sample	Unsatisfactory testing item	Result
7 candied lotus seeds	Sulphur dioxide (preservative)	660-980 ppm ⁽¹⁾ *
1 preserved pummelo	Benzoic acid (preservative)	1710 ppm ⁽²⁾

- (1) A commonly used preservative but the detected levels exceeded the legal limit (500 ppm). It is of low toxicity and should not pose adverse health effects on consumers. Since sulphur dioxide is water soluble, most of it can be removed through washing, soaking and cooking. Individuals who are allergic to this preservative may experience symptoms such as shortness of breath, headache and nausea.
- (2) The detected levels exceeded legal limits (1000 ppm), but they are of low toxicity and will not) cause adverse health effects

* The result has been announced in the Food Safety Report for November 2012.

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 vendors concerned.
- Take follow-up samples for analysis.
- Take prosecution actions if there is sufficient evidence.

Advices for the trade

- Should comply with the legal requirements and follow Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP). They should use permitted food additives only in an appropriate manner.
- Retailers should source food from reliable suppliers. Conduct quality audit to incoming materials and end products to ensure that ingredients used are within legal standards.
- The trade should maintain a good recording system in accordance with the Food Safety Ordinance to allow source tracing if needed.

Advice for consumers

■ Tips for purchasing festive food

- ❑ Buy food from reliable retailers with good hygienic conditions.
- ❑ When buying pre-packaged cakes and snacks, make sure that the packages are intact and note the expiry dates. May also refer to nutrition information on labels for healthier food choices.
- ❑ When buying non-packaged food such as candied lotus seeds, nuts and melon seeds, pay attention to hygienic conditions of food containers and personal hygiene of staff.
- ❑ Choose food products with natural colour. Brightly-white pistachio may have been bleached and melon seeds with unnatural gloss may have been added with mineral oil. Consumption of these food products can cause gastrointestinal discomfort.

Advice for consumers (Cont'd)

■ Tips for eating festive food

- ❑ After purchasing festive cakes, not for immediate consumption, you should store them in the fridge. Pay attention to expiry dates.
- ❑ Cook them thoroughly before consumption. Discard those with mould or abnormal smell or taste.
- ❑ Leftovers should not be stored in the refrigerator for longer than 3 days and should not be reheated more than once.
- ❑ Do not keep nuts and melon seeds for a long time and should not eat mouldy ones.
- ❑ During Lunar New Year, always maintain a balanced diet and avoid foods that are high in energy, sugar, salt, fat or cholesterol.