Seasonal Food Surveillance — Lunar New Year Food

Centre for Food Safety
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食物環境衞生署
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

食物安全中心
Centre for Food Safety

Background

- Before Lunar New Year, people would buy festive food to celebrate the holiday. At the same time, they would be concerned about the safety of the festive food.
- As such, the Centre for Food Safety recently conducted a seasonal surveillance project on Lunar New Year Food :
  - to assess the safety of LNY food and
  - to provide information to consumers for informed choices.

Types of food tested

- 666 food samples collected for testing.

- Types of food included:
  - steamed puddings (e.g., turnip pudding, festive cake)
  - poon choi
  - fried dumplings (e.g., sesame balls, crispy triangles)
  - sweetened fruits & vegetables
  - glutinous rice balls
  - seeds
  - dried vegetables & dried soybean products
  - dried aquatic products
  - Chinese preserved meat
  - others

Types of analysis

- Microbiological tests included
  - *Salmonella*, *Clostridium perfringens*, *Bacillus cereus*, *Staphylococcus aureus* and other food poisoning organisms

- Chemical tests included
  - preservatives (e.g., sulphur dioxide, benzoic acid and formaldehyde)
  - colouring matters (e.g., Sudan dyes)
  - sweeteners
  - metallic contamination (e.g., cadmium, mercury & arsenic)
  - pesticides
  - toxins (e.g. aflatoxin)
  - others

Overall results

- Overall satisfactory rate was 97.7%.
- All bacteriological test results satisfactory
- All samples satisfactory for colouring matters, sweeteners, metallic contamination and pesticides
- In total 15 samples were unsatisfactory in respect of preservatives and toxin.

The unsatisfactory samples

- 15 unsatisfactory samples:

Samples	Tests	Results
2 dried daylily flowers, 5 sweetened winter-melon, 2 bamboo fungus, 1 sweetened mandarin	Sulphur dioxide (preservative)	690 - 16000 ppm[1,2]
1 festive cake	Benzoic acid (preservative)	1800 ppm[2]
3 glutinous rice balls	Aflatoxin	0.046 - 0.059 ppm[3]
1 dried shrimp	Boric acid	410 ppm[4]

1. Sulphur dioxide is a commonly used preservative. It can be removed by thorough soaking, washing & cooking.
2. The level concerned is low and should not pose significant health effect on consumers.
3. Although aflatoxin is carcinogenic, the level is low and immediate health risk upon normal consumption is unlikely.
4. Boric acid is not a permitted preservative. At the concerned level, immediate health risk upon normal consumption is unlikely.

Advice for trade

- Use only permitted food additives, follow good manufacturing practice & comply with legal requirements.
- Adopt "good manufacturing practice" (GMP) for manufacturing food products.
- Obtain raw materials from reliable suppliers.
- Verify the specifications for quality product, such as the decontamination process for reduction of aflatoxin level.
- Maintain good storage conditions for peanuts and nut products including:
  - dry and cool environment;
  - stock rotation should be on a first in first out basis.

Advice for consumers

- Most sulphur dioxide in the dried vegetables can be removed by thoroughly soaking, washing and cooking of food.
- Purchase from licensed and reliable retailers.
- Observe the packing and storage condition.
- Keep the products of peanuts and nut products at dry and cool environment (below 20^{o}C and humidity <80%).
- Maintain a balanced diet and avoid eating too much Lunar New Year food with high energy, sugar, fat and/ or cholesterol.