
Targeted Food Surveillance – Sulphur Dioxide in Meat

Centre for Food Safety

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

November 2007

Background

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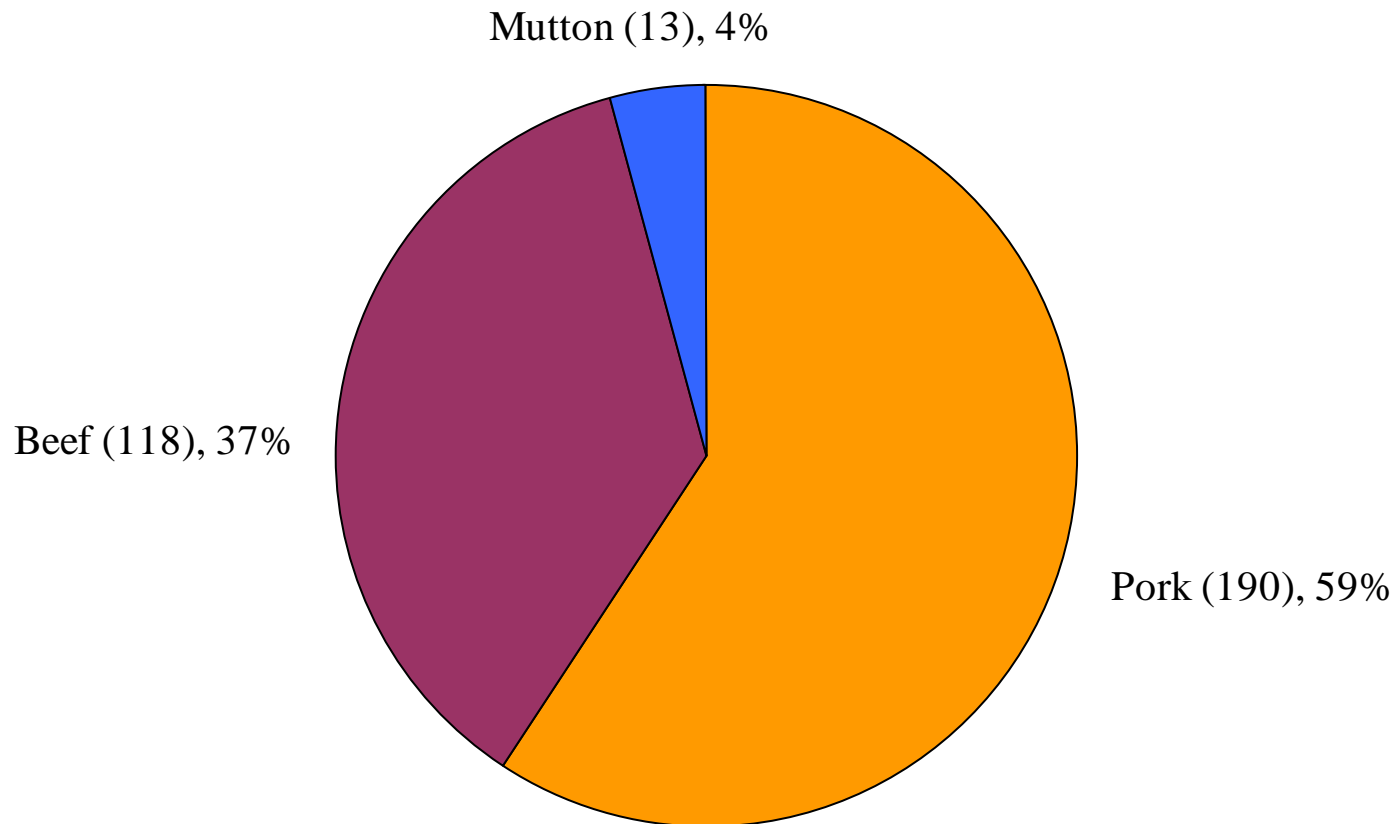
- ❑ Sulphur dioxide is a commonly used food preservative. However, under the law, selling fresh or frozen meat containing sulphur dioxide is an offence.
- ❑ Given the perishable nature of meat, individual meat traders had been found to use sulphur dioxide against the law so as to make the colour of fresh meat look fresher.
- ❑ The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has detected sulphur dioxide in some meat samples in the past. As in the previously announced Food Safety Report in June, sulphur dioxide at levels from 33 to 220 ppm were detected in 6 fresh pork samples.

■ Objective

- ❑ The CFS recently conducted a targeted food surveillance project to assess the use of sulphur dioxide in meat.

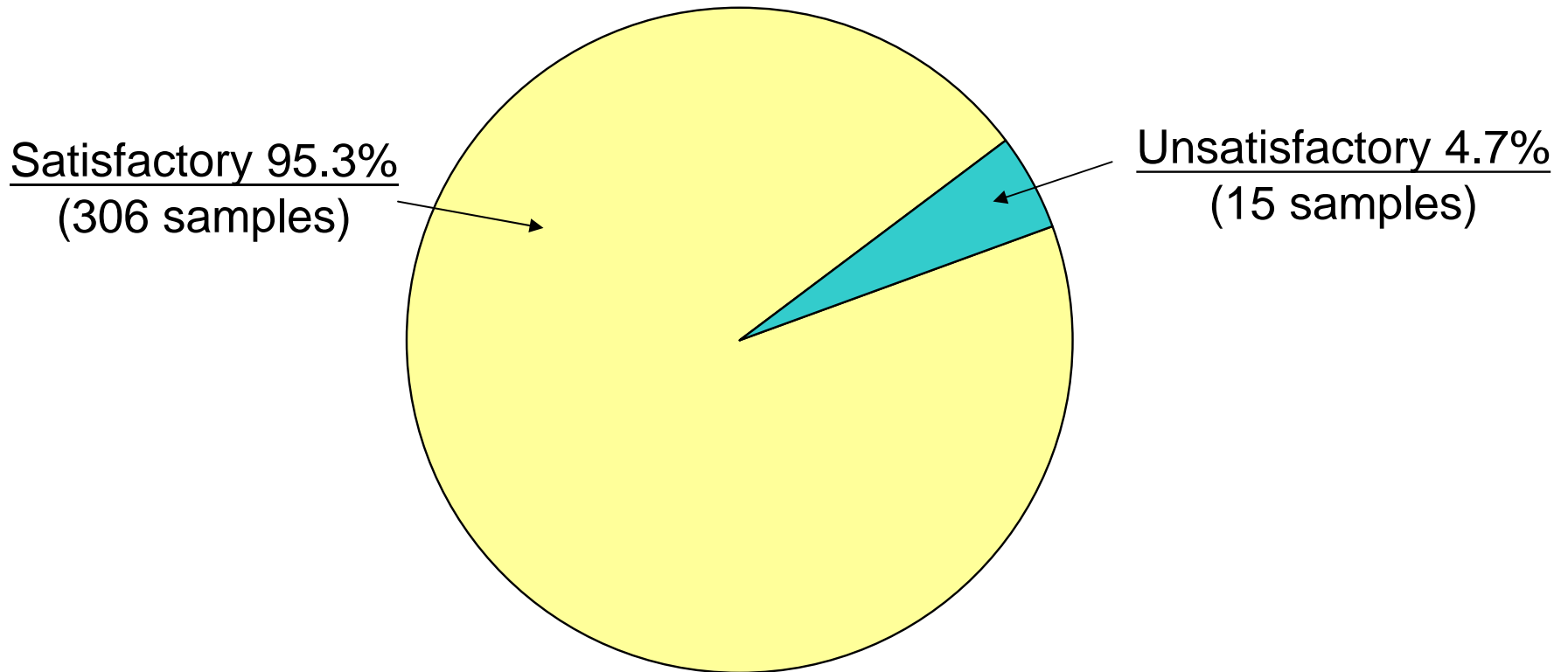
Types of meat samples tested

- 321 samples were collected for testing of sulphur dioxide.



Overall results

- Overall satisfactory rate was 95.3%.



Unsatisfactory samples

- 15 samples (including 11 beef, 3 pork and 1 mutton) were found to contain sulphur dioxide at levels between 23 and 3300 ppm.
- Sulphur dioxide is a commonly used preservative of low toxicity. Based on the levels of sulphur dioxide detected in the meat samples, normal consumption should not pose adverse health effects on consumers. As sulphur dioxide is water soluble, most of it can also be removed through washing and cooking.
- For susceptible individuals who are allergic to sulphur dioxide, they may experience respiratory discomfort, headaches and nausea.

Follow up actions

- Issue warning letters.
- Carry out investigation and to take follow up samples.
- Take prosecution actions if there is sufficient evidence.

Advice for trade

- The trade should not use sulphur dioxide in fresh or frozen meat.
- Under the Preservatives in Food Regulations, Cap. 132BD, addition of preservatives to fresh or frozen meat is not permitted. Contravention of the law could lead to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and six months' imprisonment.
- The trade should properly keep the fresh meat.

Advice for consumers

- Purchase meat from reliable market stalls or fresh provision shops.
- Since sulphur dioxide is of low toxicity and most of it will be removed through washing and cooking, adverse health effects on consumers upon normal consumption is unlikely.
- Take a balanced diet so as to avoid excessive exposure to food additives from a small range of food items.