Targeted Food Surveillance - Formaldehyde in Noodlefish

Centre for Food Safety
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

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食物環境衞生署
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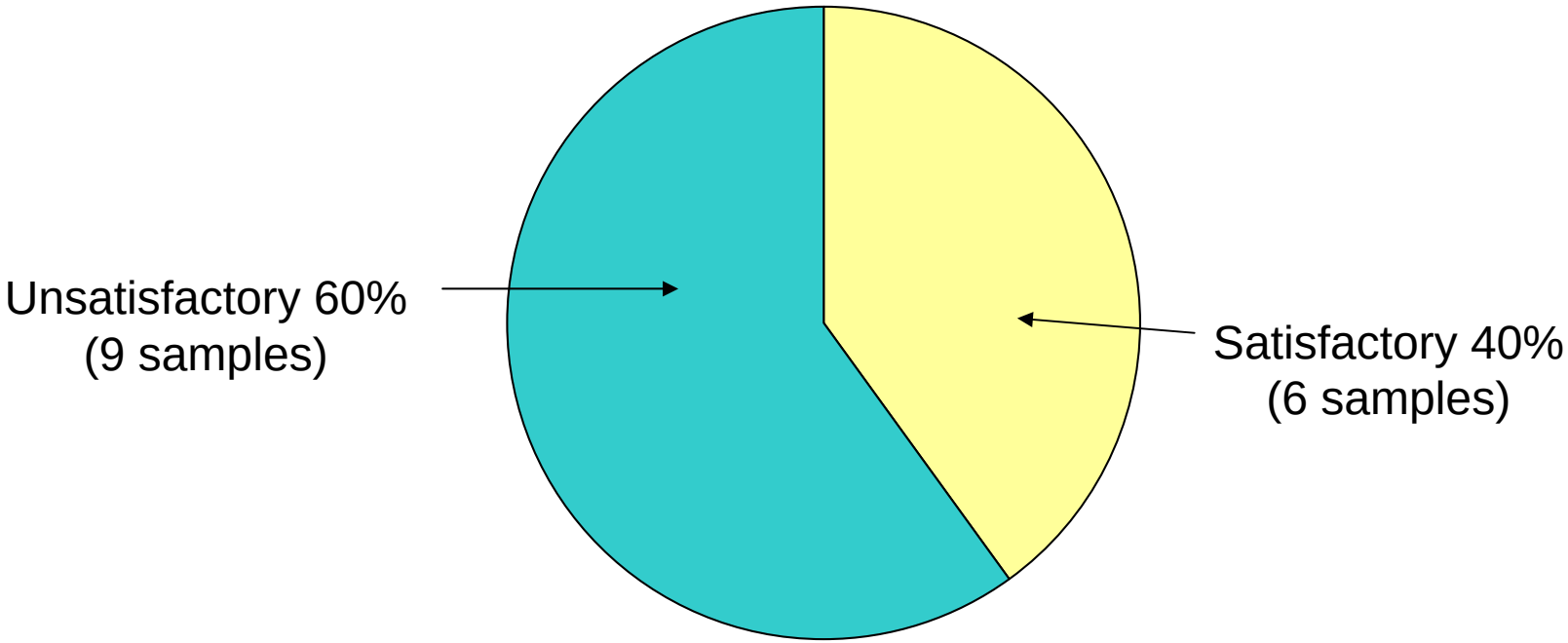
Background

- Objective:
  - to assess the occurrence of formaldehyde in small fish.

- Sampling:
  - 15 samples of noodlefish were collected from markets for testing of formaldehyde.

Overall results

- Overall satisfactory rate was 40%.
- Totally 9 unsatisfactory samples were found to contain formaldehyde ranging from 160 to 620 mg/kg.



Unsatisfactory samples

- Some aquatic products such as Bombay Duck Fish contain trimethylamine oxide which decomposes naturally to form formaldehyde and dimethylamine. If formaldehyde and dimethylamine were detected of the same level of magnitude, there is evidence to suggest that the formaldehyde was natural. But this time, no such corresponding dimethylamine was detected in the samples of noodlefish and the formaldehyde was believed to be added to the noodlefish.

- The detected formaldehyde was believed to have been added on as a preservative after the fish were caught, or during transportation or storage

- At the levels of formaldehyde detected in the noodlefish samples, normal consumption should not pose any adverse health effects.

Follow up actions

- Issuing warning letters and asking concerned retailers to stop selling noodlefish.
- Tracing the source of fish in question.
- If there is evidence that formaldehyde was added in noodlefish, the Centre for Food Safety will take prosecution.

Advice for trade

- Not to add formaldehyde into fish or other marine products.

- Under existing legislation, formaldehyde is not permitted for use as a food preservative. Contravention of the law could lead to a maximum fine of $50,000 and six months' imprisonment.

Advice for consumers

- When buying or cooking marine products (e.g., noodlefish):
  - patronize reliable shops;
  - choose only fish that are fresh and avoid those with unusual smell;
  - avoid buying noodlefish that are stiff (formaldehyde could stiffen flesh of fish); and
  - wash and cook marine products thoroughly as formaldehyde is water soluble and could dissipate upon heating.