

FEHD responds to media enquiries

â€‹In response to media enquiries, a spokesman for the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) said today (July 18):

â€‹The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the FEHD collects food samples at retail level for safety testing under its routine Food Surveillance Programme. While designated samples provided by retail outlets will not be accepted for testing, food samples are taken by staff of the FEHD who purchase the products as customer without revealing their identity to the vendors. If a sample fails to meet the established safety standards, the CFS will take appropriate risk management actions, including issuing press releases to inform the public of the related risks. According to the Microbiological Guidelines for Food, if ready-to-eat food contains *Bacillus cereus* at a level of less than 1 000 per gram, it is considered satisfactory; a level of 1 000 to 100 000 is considered borderline but requires further action; a level of more than 100 000 is considered unsatisfactory.

â€‹The CFS collected a sample of the bottled preserved bean curd concerned for testing from a retail outlet in Sai Ying Pun at the end of June. The test result showed that the sample contained *Bacillus cereus* at a level of 130 000 per gram. According to the Microbiological Guidelines for Food, if ready-to-eat food contains *Bacillus cereus* at a level of more than 100 000 per gram, it is considered unsatisfactory. The CFS has therefore strengthened relevant surveillance immediately, and purchased in early July a sample of another batch of the same bottled preserved bean curd product from a retail outlet in Jordan for testing. The test result showed that the sample contained *Bacillus cereus* at a level of 10 000 per gram, which is considered borderline but not satisfactory and further action is required. According to the Microbiological Guidelines for Food, the CFS shall collect a follow-up sample of another batch of the product (not designated samples provided by the retail outlet). The CFS staff then purchased a sample of another batch of the bottled preserved bean curd product from the above-mentioned retail outlet in Jordan again in mid-July. The follow-up test result showed that the sample contained *Bacillus cereus* at a level of 1 300 000 per gram, which is considered unsatisfactory. The CFS has informed the retailer and manufacturer concerned, and has instructed them to stop sales and to initiate recalls of the affected product immediately, as well as to continue improving the food production process. The investigation is ongoing.

â€‹Furthermore, during an inspection of the food factory concerned by the CFS staff in the afternoon of July 4, it was found that some of the raw materials were improperly stored and the hygiene condition of the packaging area was not up to standard, which increase the risk of food contamination. The CFS staff immediately provided health education on food safety and hygiene to the person-in-charge and staff of the food factory, and requested them to review and improve the food production process, including proper storage of raw materials, and to carry out thorough cleaning and disinfection.

â€œFrom 2021 to mid-July of 2024, the CFS collected under its routine Food Surveillance Programme more than 140 preserved bean curd samples that cover 26 brands, including 23 preserved bean curd samples produced by the manufacturer concerned, for testing. In addition to the two samples concerned, an excessive amount of *Bacillus cereus* was also found in a sample of another brand. The CFS has taken follow-up actions on the above-mentioned unsatisfactory samples in accordance with the established procedures, including informing the vendors concerned of the test results, instructing them to stop selling the affected products concerned and tracing the sources of the food items in question. The CFS has also announced the test results concerning the unsatisfactory samples and explained to the public the food safety risks involved.

â€œ*Bacillus cereus* is a spore-forming bacterium that grows best at 30 degrees Celsius to 37 degrees Celsius but stops growing at below 4 degrees Celsius. It is commonly found in the environment. Unhygienic conditions in food processing and storage may give rise to its growth. Consuming food contaminated with excessive *Bacillus cereus* or its heat-stable toxins may cause gastrointestinal upset such as vomiting and diarrhea. In general, the presence of more than 100 000 cells of *Bacillus cereus* per gram of food can cause food poisoning.