

FEHD strives to ensure food safety of oysters to be eaten in raw state (with photos)

To safeguard food safety and protect public health, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) and the Environmental Hygiene Branch of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) have enhanced inspections before the Lunar New Year holidays of various licensed food premises across the territory to ensure that oysters to be eaten in a raw state (raw oysters) be stored at the proper temperature.

A spokesman for the FEHD said today (February 2), "The FEHD has launched a series of operations since Wednesday (January 31) and stepped up inspections in various districts. No irregularities have been detected so far. Health advice was also given, and food safety pamphlets were distributed to operators and staff of food premises regarding the proper way of storing and handling raw oysters."

As stipulated under the permit/licensing conditions of the restricted food permit or written permission issued by the FEHD, all raw oysters ready for immediate consumption shall be kept in a refrigerator or compartment of a refrigerator separated from other food items at a temperature between 0 and 4 degrees Celsius. If a breach of the aforesaid condition is found, FEHD officers will, depending on the actual circumstances, issue verbal warnings or warning letters, and may even consider cancellation of the permits/licences of relevant premises.

The spokesman reminded that as oysters feed by filtering a large volume of seawater and absorbing suspended food particles therein, bacteria (e.g. *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* and *Vibrio vulnificus*) and viruses (e.g. norovirus and Hepatitis A virus) may accumulate in them if they are grown in or harvested from contaminated water. Consuming oysters without thorough cooking might risk direct intake of these microorganisms. Susceptible groups, such as pregnant women, young children, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems or liver diseases, should avoid eating them.

In addition, the CFS held a Food Safety Seminar for Trade in December 2023 and reminded food businesses to follow Good Hygiene Practices when handling and serving oysters. If raw oysters are served, food handlers are urged to take heed of the following:

- Keep the raw oysters cool at 4 degrees C or below all the way before eating to inhibit bacterial growth;
- Prevent cross-contamination of foods during storage by keeping raw oysters in a closed container in a designated refrigerator;
- Practise good hygiene at all times, including washing hands and using clean and separate utensils for handling oysters; and

- Use clean protective gloves when handling or shucking oysters to prevent injury and infection.

"However, these measures are not all fail-safe," the CFS spokesman added. "Thorough cooking is the most effective way to reduce the risk of foodborne illness."

The CFS has issued new food safety advice that provides the public with information on the food safety risks of raw oysters as well as a set of trade guidelines to assist the food businesses in implementing appropriate food safety measures when serving oysters to be eaten raw. For the sake of food safety, the public, especially susceptible populations, should cook oysters thoroughly before eating. Details of the advice and guidelines are available on the CFS's website (www.cfs.gov.hk/oyster).

The FEHD will continue to step up inspections to ensure that the licensing/permit conditions are observed by the licensees/permit holders or relevant operators, and the hygienic standards stipulated in the laws are met.

