

## LCQ13: Preventing the epidemic from spreading via imported food products

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Priscilla Leung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (July 14):

Question:

Last month, three members of a family were confirmed one after another to have contracted the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) with N501Y mutant strain. Among the three environmental samples collected by the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health from the frozen compartment of a refrigerator at the patients' home, one sample collected from the packaging of frozen crocodile spare ribs imported from Thailand has been tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. The samples of the relevant products collected subsequently by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department from the storage points/warehouses and shops of the food trader concerned have been tested negative for the virus. CFS concluded that the sample in question was more likely to have been contaminated at the patients' home. However, some members of the public are still worried about contracting COVID-19 upon coming into contact with the packaging of imported food products. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of samples collected from imported food products and their packaging by CFS for COVID-19 virus tests since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic and, among such samples, the number of those tested positive for the virus, with a breakdown by the type of food products from which the samples were collected;

(2) apart from stepping up the testing of imported frozen food products and their packaging, what new measures the Government has put in place to prevent COVID-19 from spreading via imported food products; and

(3) what new measures the Government has put in place to prevent those workers who need to come into contact with imported food products in their daily work from contracting COVID-19?

Reply:

President,

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has been collecting samples of different types of frozen foods and their packaging at the import level for precautionary COVID-19 testing since mid-2020. As at the end of June 2021, more than 12 000 relevant samples from over 50 food origins were tested. The samples included different

types of meat (about 50 per cent), aquatic products (over 40 per cent) and other frozen foods such as fruits. The test results were all negative.

Regarding the case of a packaging sample of frozen crocodile spare ribs tested positive for the virus among the environmental samples collected at the residence of a confirmed COVID-19 patient by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health on June 15, 2021, the CFS immediately requested the vendor to suspend the sale of the products concerned and collected a total of 103 food and packaging samples of relevant crocodile products from the vendor's storage points/warehouses and retail outlets for testing. All samples were tested negative. In light of the test results available, the CFS considered that the packaging sample of frozen crocodile spare ribs collected at the residence of the confirmed COVID-19 patient was more likely to be contaminated at the said residence. The vendor could therefore resume the sale of relevant products.

Considering the concerns of frozen food practitioners about the risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus, the FEHD has been providing voluntary and free COVID-19 testing services for practitioners of licensed cold stores continuously since November 2020. As at the end of June 2021, the testing agency of the FEHD tested over 8 400 samples from cold store practitioners. The test results were all negative.

Meanwhile, in consultation with the CHP of the Department of Health, the CFS issued the "Health Advice for Frozen Food Handlers on the Prevention of COVID-19" to the food trade (including licensed cold stores and licensed food premises etc.) in November 2020. The Health Advice was also disseminated to container terminal operators and the cold chain logistics sector to remind frozen food handlers of the potential risks of infection and the need to take relevant measures, including observing good personal hygiene practices, putting on personal protection equipment, and maintaining environmental hygiene and social distancing, etc. Furthermore, the CFS discussed with licensed cold store operators on stepping up disinfection work of the outer packaging of imported frozen foods and the working environment of cold stores, and issued to them the "Prevention of COVID-19 – Guidance on Disinfecting the Working Environment and the Food Package of Cold Stores at Import Level" in December 2020 to offer advice on relevant preventive measures, including the types of disinfectants and their usage, precautions for the use of chlorine-based disinfectants and personal protection measures, etc. The CFS understands that the trade has actively followed the advice to put in place measures against the pandemic. The CFS will continue to maintain close liaison with the trade to enhance the anti-epidemic work with regard to imported frozen foods.

In fact, the COVID-19 virus is predominantly transmitted through droplets. Based on the available scientific information, the World Health Organization also considers that it is unlikely for human to be infected with COVID-19 via food. With due attention paid to personal hygiene and proper personal protection measures, practitioners in frequent contact with frozen foods are believed to have a low risk of contracting the virus through contacting frozen foods in their daily work. Nonetheless, the CFS will

continue to take samples of frozen foods and their packaging imported from different origins for testing, keep in view the latest scientific data on the virus and closely monitor the risk of viral transmission via imported frozen foods for adjusting the testing strategy in a timely manner.

In addition, the CFS will continue to remind the public to maintain good personal, food and environmental hygiene at all times, including washing hands before and after handling raw and cooked foods, cooking food thoroughly, separating raw meat and internal organs from cooked foods, etc. Food business operators and practitioners should always maintain high standards of hygiene and cleanliness by keeping their hands clean and frequently cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, especially food contact surfaces (e.g. tableware and insulated bags for takeaways) and high-touch points (e.g. door handlers and water taps) in food premises. The CFS has also uploaded information and advice on COVID-19 and food safety to its dedicated website "Let's Beat COVID-19 Together" for browsing by the public and the food trade.