

LCQ16: Food safety and descriptions of sashimi and sushi

Following is a question by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 8):

Question:

Last month, the Consumer Council published the test results of 50 sashimi samples taken at the retail level, which included that: 98 per cent of the samples contained a heavy metal compound of methylmercury (of a level exceeding the limit by nearly two-folds at the most), some samples carried parasites and worm eggs, and some samples were actually rainbow trout and low-priced tuna although the species shown on their descriptions were salmon and high-priced bluefin tuna respectively. Regarding the food safety and descriptions of sashimi and sushi, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it received, in the past three years, reports on members of the public having been found to have (i) parasites or worm eggs and (ii) a high level of methylmercury in their bodies after consuming sashimi or sushi; if so, of the respective numbers of such cases;

(2) of the quantity of fish imported in each of the past three years for making sashimi or sushi (with a breakdown by species); the respective numbers of samples of such fish taken in each of the past three years at the (i) wholesale and (ii) retail levels by the Centre for Food Safety under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) for testing microorganisms and heavy metals, and the respective numbers and percentages of such samples found to contain (a) parasites or worm eggs and (b) methylmercury;

(3) of the number of surprise inspections conducted in each of the past three years by law enforcement officers of FEHD on food premises selling sashimi or sushi; the number of prosecutions instituted against the operators of those food premises which were found, during such inspections, to have breached the Food Business Regulation (Cap 132 sub. leg. X) (with a breakdown by type of offences), and the number of those food premises the food business licences of which were cancelled as a result;

(4) whether the Customs and Excise Department, for the purpose of enforcing the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (Cap 362) in each of the past three years, (i) deployed law enforcement officers to take sashimi and sushi samples from food premises for tests to ascertain if the species to which they belonged tallied with those shown on the descriptions; if so, of the number of the relevant prosecutions, and (ii) provided training for its law enforcement officers on the identification of fish species; if so, of the number of officers who received such training; and

(5) whether it has put in place new measures to enhance the food safety of sashimi and sushi, in order to protect public health; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap 132) stipulates that all food for sale for human consumption in Hong Kong must be fit for human consumption.

The maximum permitted concentration levels of metallic contaminants in food are stipulated in the Food Adulteration (Metallic Contamination) Regulations (Cap 132V). Fish contains various nutrients (e.g. omega-3 fatty acid and high quality proteins) essential for the human body, but certain types of fish, including the larger species such as shark, swordfish, alfonso and some tuna species, may contain higher levels of methylmercury. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) always advises that pregnant women, women planning pregnancy and young children should avoid eating these types of fish. CFS also encourages the public to maintain a balanced and diversified diet.

Good aquaculture practices and/or freezing treatment can reduce the risk of parasites in aquatic products. The Code of Practice for Fish and Fishery Products issued by the Codex Alimentarius Commission states that freezing fish at -20°C or below for seven days or at -35°C for about 20 hours can kill parasites. Even though the dead parasites will remain in the meat of the fish, the risk of parasitic infection can still be effectively minimised. FEHD has been educating and reminding the trade to obtain from importers an official health certificate issued by the place of origin, so as to ensure that the food concerned has been properly handled (e.g. by good aquaculture practices and/or freezing treatment).

The Food Business Regulation (Cap 132X) stipulates that anyone involved in the sale of restricted foods (including sashimi, sushi, and oysters and meat to be eaten raw, etc.) or the provision of sashimi for consumption in a restaurant is required to obtain permission from the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene. According to the licensing conditions, ingredients for preparing sashimi dishes in food premises should be properly stored and handled. FEHD conducts inspections to licensed food premises based on their risk levels to examine the hygiene conditions of the premises and check their compliance with the licensing conditions and the relevant statutory requirements.

CFS has been reminding the public through various channels of the risks of consuming raw fish and the various points to note, including patronising reliable food premises and shops which are licensed or issued with a permit for selling the food concerned.

To safeguard food safety, CFS takes samples at the import, wholesale and retail levels under a risk-based approach for testing.

Reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) The Department of Health does not keep the relevant statistics.

(2) CFS does not keep statistics on the quantities and types of sashimi products imported into Hong Kong each year.

From January 2016 to March 2019, CFS collected about 1 000 samples of different types of sashimi for chemical (including metallic contaminants) and microbiological testing. Only three samples were detected with the total mercury levels exceeding the legal standard, and the rest all passed the tests. The overall satisfactory rate was 99.7 per cent. CFS has made public the test results of the unsatisfactory samples and taken follow-up actions, which included instructing the relevant vendors to stop selling the sashimi products concerned, and tracing the sources and distribution of the incriminated sashimi.

(3) The numbers of inspections to food premises conducted by FEHD and prosecutions against food premises for selling restricted foods without permission, and the numbers of food premises with licence suspended or cancelled over the past three years are as follows:

	2016	2017	2018	2019 (up to March 31)
Number of inspections to food premises	247 422	248 452	230 254	54 896
Number of prosecutions against sale of restricted foods without permission	21	18	22	7
Number of food premises with licence suspended	109	103	93	19
Number of food premises with licence cancelled	11	2	6	0

FEHD does not have breakdown of the above statistics concerning food premises selling sushi and sashimi.

(4) According to the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, under the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (Cap 362) (TDO), any person who applies a false or misleading description to goods supplied in the course of any trade or business commits an offence. The Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) has

proactively handled complaints or referrals from relevant government departments in accordance with the TD0, including test purchases, sending samples to laboratories for testing and seeking advice from experts in identification of fish species. C&ED will take appropriate enforcement actions for violation of the TD0.

Between 2016 and 2018, C&ED received a total of 46 complaints involving fish products with false claims on product species (including six complaints involving sashimi and sushi). After consolidating these complaints, 14 detailed investigation cases were established by C&ED. During the same period, there were seven successful prosecution cases with imposition of fine ranging from \$3,000 to \$18,000. Besides, six cases were concluded with acceptance of undertaking from the traders.

(5) FEHD will continue to carry out inspections to licensed food premises in accordance with their risk levels. CFS will continue to remind the public through various channels about the risks of consuming raw fish and the relevant points to note. It will also continue to adopt a risk-based approach in taking food samples at the import, wholesale and retail levels for testing.