

Packaging samples of imported frozen beef and frozen pork skin tested positive for COVID-19 virus

A spokesman for the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) said today (February 21) that the CFS received testing reports from the Department of Health that four packaging samples of imported frozen food items were found to be positive for the COVID-19 virus during precautionary testing.

The CFS earlier collected 36 samples for testing from a batch of around 1 100 cartons of frozen beef (total of around 29 tonnes) imported from Brazil via sea. Test results showed one outer packaging sample and two inner packaging samples were found to be positive for the virus. The batch of beef has been stored inside a warehouse in Tsing Yi after import and has not entered the market.

In addition, the CFS also collected 12 samples earlier for testing from a batch of around 300 cartons of frozen pork skin (total of around seven tonnes) imported from Poland via sea. Test results showed one inner packaging sample was found to be positive for the virus. The batch of pork skin has been stored inside a warehouse in Tsuen Wan after import and has not entered the market.

Upon learning the test results, the CFS has inspected the warehouses and asked the operators to conduct thorough cleaning and disinfection. The CFS has ordered the importers concerned to dispose the beef and pork skin of the same batches. In addition, the CFS will step up the sampling of similar products for testing.

To prevent the import of the COVID-19 virus through imported frozen foods, the CFS has stepped up precautionary testing measures since mid-2020, including enhanced testing of various types of frozen foods and their packaging imported from different countries/regions, which involves taking samples at the Airport Food Inspection Offices and cold stores of importers. Up to now, over 29 000 samples of foods and their packaging were collected for testing of the virus. Apart from the abovementioned samples, only the pomfret fish and packaging samples announced in August 2021, and the cuttlefish slice surface and inner packaging samples announced in November 2021 were found to be positive. The CFS will continue the sampling of imported frozen foods and their packaging for testing. During testing, the products being tested will be held in the warehouse. They will be released to the market for sale only if the result is completed and showing a negative result. This would ensure affected products will not be distributed to the market for sale.

The COVID-19 virus is predominantly transmitted through droplets and cannot multiply in food or food packaging. According to current scientific

knowledge, the World Health Organization and food safety assessment authorities in overseas countries considered that it is unlikely that the COVID-19 virus can be transmitted to humans via food consumption. Nevertheless, members of the public should always observe personal, food and environmental hygiene. The CFS reminds the public to pay attention to the following:

- * Always keep hands clean, particularly before touching the mouth, nose or eyes;
- * Rub hands with liquid soap for at least 20 seconds when washing before and after handling chilled and frozen food and its packaging, if any; after going to the toilet; and before eating;
- * Handle raw and cooked food separately, and pay special attention when handling raw meat and offal, to avoid cross-contamination of food; and
- * Cook food thoroughly and avoid consuming raw or undercooked animal products.