

Prepackaged date sample detected with excessive preservative and in breach of food labelling regulation

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department announced today (December 18) that a prepackaged date sample was found to contain sulphur dioxide, a preservative, at a level exceeding the legal limit, together with another preservative, sorbic acid. The functional class and name of the two additives were not declared on the food label. Members of the public should not consume the affected batch of the product. The trade should also stop using or selling the affected batch of the product immediately if they possess it.

Product details are as follows:

Product name: Preserved Date
Place of origin: China
Distributor: Premier Food Ltd
Net weight: 250 grams per pack
Best-before date: December 31, 2021

"The CFS collected the above-mentioned sample of date from an online shop for testing under its routine Food Surveillance Programme. The test result showed that the sample contained sulphur dioxide at a level of 180 parts per million (ppm), exceeding the legal limit of 100 ppm. The functional class and name of the additive were also not declared on the food label," a CFS spokesman said.

"Sorbic acid at a level of 100 ppm was also found in the sample. Although the level is below the maximum permitted level of 1,000 ppm under the regulation, the functional class and name of the additive were also not declared on the food label of the sample.

"The CFS has informed the vendor concerned of the irregularities and instructed it to stop sale and remove from shelves the affected batch of the product. The distributor concerned has initiated a recall according to the CFS's instructions. Members of the public may call its hotline at 2291 6216 during office hours for enquiries about the recall. The CFS is also tracing the source of the affected product," the spokesman added.

Sulphur dioxide is a commonly used preservative in a variety of foods including dried vegetables, dried fruits, pickled vegetables and salted fish products. Sulphur dioxide is water soluble, and most of it can be removed through washing and cooking. However, susceptible individuals who are allergic to this preservative may experience breathing difficulties, headaches and nausea after consumption.

The spokesman supplemented, "Based on the level of sulphur dioxide

detected in the above-mentioned sample, adverse health effects will not be caused by usual consumption."

The spokesman reminded the food trade that the use of preservatives in food must comply with the Preservatives in Food Regulation (Cap. 132BD). Furthermore, the Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations (Cap. 132W) require that prepackaged food shall be legibly marked or labelled with a list of ingredients. The regulations also state that for all prepackaged food for sale in Hong Kong containing sulphite in a concentration of 10 ppm or more, the functional class of the sulphite and its name shall be specified in the list of ingredients. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and six months' imprisonment upon conviction.

The CFS will alert the trade, continue to follow up on the incident and take appropriate action. An investigation is ongoing.