

Public views invited for consultation on strengthening regulation of harmful substances in food

The Government today (December 11) published a public consultation document on the proposed amendments to the Harmful Substances in Food Regulations (Cap. 132AF) for strengthening the regulation of harmful substances such as industrially produced trans fats and mycotoxins. The consultation period will last for three months until March 15, 2021.

A Government spokesman said, "We have been closely monitoring international developments on the safeguarding of food safety, including making reference to the food safety standards of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and other places, as well as considering local dietary practices and risk assessment results, so as to review and update the local food safety standards and regulatory arrangements from time to time based on scientific evidence."

Considering the grave food safety risks posed by aflatoxins to the local population, the Government proposes to tighten up their maximum levels currently permitted under the Regulations for certain tree nuts, peanuts and dried fruit which are more susceptible to aflatoxin contamination. Indeed, long-term ingestion of aflatoxins could result in liver cancer. Having regard to the substantially higher carcinogenic potency of aflatoxins in hepatitis B virus-infected individuals, and the higher prevalence of hepatitis B virus infection in the Hong Kong population compared with that in many neighbouring places, the Government also proposes to lower the permitted maximum level of aflatoxins in any other food in general. In addition, the proposals include strengthening the regulation of two other types of mycotoxins, i.e. deoxynivalenol (also known as vomitoxin) and patulin, in specified foods as well.

Furthermore, to better protect the health of the local population (including infants), the Government proposes to set or update the maximum levels for five harmful substances (i.e. benzo[a]pyrene, glycidyl fatty acid esters, melamine, 3-monochloropropane-1,2-diol and erucic acid) in edible fats and oils, condiments or formula products intended for infants.

The spokesman said that these food groups are closely related to the dietary practices of the local population, and the Codex Alimentarius Commission or other places have established standards in relation to them for the harmful substances concerned.

The Government also proposes to regard partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs) as a prohibited substance in food with reference to the recommendation of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the relevant regulatory measures adopted in other places. PHOs are the major source of industrially produced

trans fatty acids, which are relatively common in margarines, vegetable shortenings, and various kinds of baked food with margarines or vegetable shortenings as ingredients. Scientific research has revealed that industrially produced trans fatty acids are harmful to health, contributing significantly to an increased risk of coronary heart disease.

To protect public health at source, the Government proposes to prohibit the import of any edible fats and oils containing PHOs and the sale of any food (including edible fats and oils) containing PHOs under the Regulations. It is also proposed in the amendments that if any prepackaged food contains hydrogenated oils, it must be indicated accordingly in the list of ingredients.

"The WHO has set the goal of eliminating industrially produced trans fatty acids from the global food supply by 2023. As of now, 40 places around the world have passed or implemented policy measures recommended by the WHO, and 12 large-scale multinational food companies have also committed to achieving the WHO's goal in their products by 2023. In Hong Kong, PHO-free margarines, vegetable shortenings and other alternative edible fats and oils are currently available in the local market, and many catering and baking industries have already chosen these PHO-free fats and oils for food production," the spokesman added.

Regarding the implementation of the regulatory arrangements, the Government proposes to allow a grace period of 18 months for the Amendment Regulations to be gazetted to come into force, so that stakeholders such as the food trade and the private testing and laboratory sector will have reasonable time to get prepared for the updated food safety standards.

The consultation document is available at the websites of the Food and Health Bureau (www.fhb.gov.hk) and the Centre for Food Safety of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (www.cfs.gov.hk).

Members of the public are welcome to offer their views on the proposals by post (43/F, Queensway Government Offices, 66 Queensway, Hong Kong), fax (2893 3547) or email (harmful-sub-consultation@fehd.gov.hk) on or before March 15, 2021.