

Two fresh beef samples found to contain sulphur dioxide

The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department announced today (September 18) that two fresh beef samples were found to contain sulphur dioxide, a preservative which is not permitted to be used in fresh meat. The CFS is following up on the cases.

A spokesman for the CFS said, "Subsequent to announcing earlier that a fresh beef sample taken from a fresh provision shop in Quarry Bay was detected with sulphur dioxide, the CFS took another fresh beef sample from the same shop for testing during a follow-up investigation. A similar irregularity was detected with the test result showing that the sample contained sulphur dioxide at a level of 50 parts per million (ppm). In addition, the CFS took a fresh beef sample from a stall in Shek Tong Tsui Market for testing under its routine Food Surveillance Programme. The test result showed that the sample contained sulphur dioxide at a level of 580 ppm."

According to the Preservatives in Food Regulation (Cap 132BD), it is an offence to add sulphur dioxide to fresh or chilled meat. The maximum penalty is a \$50,000 fine and six months' imprisonment.

The CFS has informed the vendors concerned of the above-mentioned irregularities. Prosecution will be instituted should there be sufficient evidence.

Sulphur dioxide is a commonly used preservative in a variety of foods including dried fruits, pickled vegetables and meat products such as sausages and grilled burgers, but under the regulation it is not permitted in fresh or chilled meat. Nonetheless, individual meat traders may illegally use sulphur dioxide to make meat look fresher. This preservative is of low toxicity. As it is water soluble, 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.

The spokesman reminded the food trade to comply with the law and not to sell fresh or chilled meat adulterated with sulphur dioxide. Members of the public should purchase meat from reliable market stalls or fresh provision shops. They should avoid buying or consuming meat which is unnaturally red and maintain a balanced diet to avoid malnutrition or excessive exposure to chemicals from a small range of food items.

The CFS will continue to follow up on the cases and take appropriate action. Investigations are ongoing.