
Targeted Food Surveillance – Sulphur Dioxide in Meat (2nd Phase)

Centre for Food Safety

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

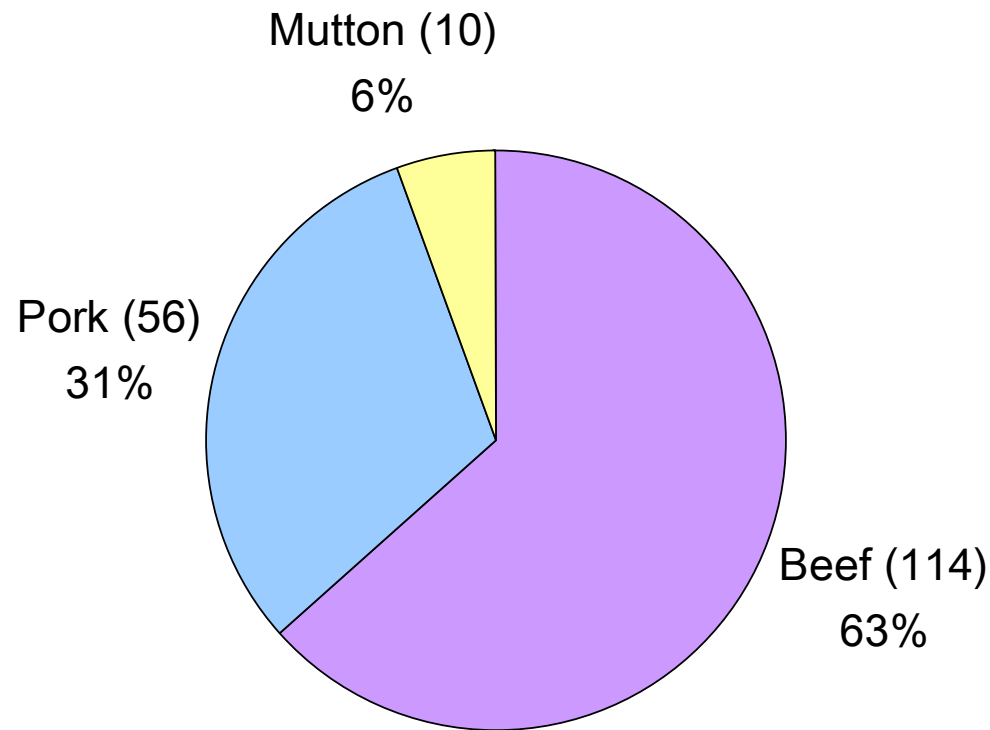
December 2012

Background

- Sulphur dioxide is a commonly used preservative in a variety of foods including dried fruits, pickled vegetables and sausages. However, under the local legislation, sulphur dioxide is not permitted in fresh, chilled or frozen meat.
- Given the perishable nature of meat, individual meat traders had been found to use sulphur dioxide against the law so as to make the colour of meat apparently fresher.
- The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has repeatedly detected meat samples containing sulphur dioxide in recent years. The targeted food surveillance, which divided into two phases, is continued this year to assess the use of sulphur dioxide in meat. This presentation gives an account of the sample analyses in the second phase.

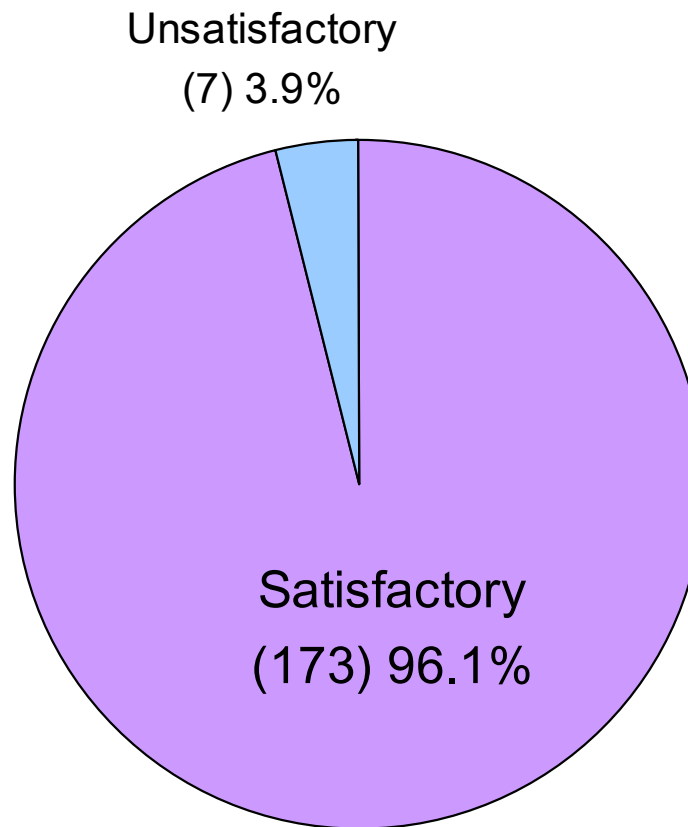
Types of meat samples tested

- The CFS collected 180 samples for testing of sulphur dioxide from September to November.
- The sampling locations have covered the meat stalls which have previous records of selling meat containing sulphur dioxide.



Overall results

- Overall satisfactory rate was 96.1%.



Unsatisfactory samples

- There were 6 fresh beef samples and involving meat 1 fresh mutton samples found to contain sulphur dioxide at levels between 13 and 590 ppm.
- 3 fresh provision shops and 4 market stalls were involved.



Follow up actions

- Issue warning letters.
- Carry out investigation and collect follow up samples.
- Take prosecution actions if there is sufficient evidence.
- The CFS will closely monitor the situation.

Advice for the trade

- Comply with the law and should not use sulphur dioxide in fresh, chilled or frozen meat.
- Under the Preservatives in Food Regulation (Cap. 132BD, sub. leg.), selling fresh, chilled or frozen meat containing sulphur dioxide is an offence and the maximum penalty is a fine of \$50,000 and 6 months' imprisonment. Upon conviction, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department will impose the penalty of suspension or cancellation of the concerned licence according to the “Demerit Points System”.
- For public market stall owners, their tenancies might be terminated.

Advice for consumers

- Sulphur dioxide is a food preservative of low toxicity. It is also water-soluble and most of it tends to be removed through washing and cooking. Adverse health effects are unlikely upon normal consumption of meat with similar levels sulphur dioxide.
- For susceptible individuals who are allergic to sulphur dioxide, they may experience breathing difficulty, headache and nausea.
- Purchase meat from reliable market stalls or fresh provision shops.
- Do not buy or consume meat which is unnaturally red.
- Take a balanced diet so as to avoid excessive exposure to food preservatives from a small range of food items.