

Proposed Amendments to the Microbiological Guidelines for Ready-to-eat Food

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the proposed amendments to the Microbiological Guidelines for Ready-to-eat Food.

Background

2. As part of the Government's on-going effort to enhance food safety for the protection of public health and consumer interest, the Administration conducts regular review of food standards and guidelines and revises them where appropriate. To keep the local microbiological guidelines on par with international development, the Ad Hoc Working Group on Microbiological Safety of Food 2011 (Working Group) was formed under the Expert Committee on Food Safety (Expert Committee) to advise on the review of the "Microbiological Guidelines for Ready-to-eat Food" (the Guidelines)*.

3. After several meetings, the Working Group has agreed upon a number of recommendations to amend the Guidelines. Since the revised Guidelines would include microbiological criteria for both ready-to-eat and non-ready-to-eat food, e.g. powdered infant formula, the

* The Microbiological Guidelines for Ready-to-eat Food was established in 2002 and amended in 2007 under the advice of the Expert Panel on Microbiological Safety of Food. Supplementary information to the Guidelines was established in 2009, covering the microbiological criteria for bottled waters, edible ice and non-bottled drinks, under the advice of an Ad hoc Working Group on Microbiological Safety of Food formed under the Expert Committee in 2008.

Guidelines would be renamed as the “Microbiological Guidelines for Food”. [Annex]

4. The trade was subsequently consulted on the proposed amendments at two technical meetings held in April 2012 and August 2013. In general, the trade representatives agreed with the proposed amendments to the Guidelines. The draft Guidelines were then discussed by the Expert Committee on 4 September 2013. With comments from Expert Committee received and after further internal discussions, the Working Group came up with the latest draft Guidelines.

Draft Microbiological Guidelines for Food

5. The draft Guidelines set out the recommended microbiological criteria for (i) Ready-to-eat food in general - Aerobic Colony Count (ACC) and Hygiene Indicator Organisms; (ii) Ready-to-eat food in general - Specific Foodborne Pathogens; and (iii) Specific food items, in Chapters I, II and III respectively.

Chapter I

6. The microbiological criteria in Chapters I and II are mainly based on the current Guidelines and revised with reference to the “Guidelines for Assessing the Microbiological Safety of Ready-to-eat Foods Placed on the Market” published by the Health Protection Agency of the United Kingdom. The criteria for aerobic colony count (ACC) and hygiene indicator organisms – *E. coli* and Enterobacteriaceae in ready-to-eat food in general are listed in Chapter I.

7. Major revisions to the existing Guidelines include (i) changes to the food categorisation for ACC assessment, i.e. the food categorisation moves away from specific food commodities to degree of processing and the raw ingredients used; and (ii) addition of Enterobacteriaceae as a hygiene indicator organism to assess the general hygiene status of food.

Chapter II

8. Criteria for ten specific foodborne pathogens in ready-to-eat food in general are included in Chapter II. Major revisions to the existing Guidelines include (i) amending the nomenclature of specific foodborne pathogens to include only the high risk serotype/strain; and (ii) incorporating the criteria for *Shigella* spp.

Chapter III

9. Chapter III covers the microbiological criteria for (i) bottled waters; (ii) edible ice; (iii) non-bottled drinks; (iv) powdered formulae for infants and young children; (v) treated, ready-to-eat spices; and (vi) live or raw bivalve molluscs intended for direct consumption. These criteria are either included in the current Supplementary Information to the Guidelines or based upon the latest Codex Code of Hygienic Practices/standard.

Way forward

10. CFS will submit notification on the amendments to the Guidelines to the World Trade Organization in accordance with the

Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement and the revised Guidelines will come into effect in 2014. A seminar on the revised Guidelines will be held to inform the trade of the amendments.

Advice sought

11. Members are invited to comment on the above amendments to the Guidelines.

Food and Health Bureau

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