Food Safety—Radiation Concerns

When a massive earthquake and tsunami hit Japan in March of this year, it crippled the Fukushima Daichii nuclear power plant. The result was the world’s worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. It is now almost two months since the disaster and Tokyo Electric is working diligently to restore normal cooling systems and fully shutting down the reactors which they estimate will take another six to nine months.

Elevated radiation levels in food supplied by Japan is a top concern for all countries that import food from Japan. Consumers have a lot of questions about the safety in consuming these products, the short and long term affects of consuming foods with possible radiation contamination and what the government is doing to ensure the safety of the food supply, especially those foods coming from Japan since this incident.

In the U.S., foods imported from Japan make up less than 4 percent of foods imported from all sources. However, almost 60 percent of all products imported from Japan are foods. The most common food products imported include seafood, snack foods and processed fruits and vegetables.

FDA’s screening at U.S. borders remains vigilant and will be augmented with radiation screening of shipments. United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents routinely use radiation detection equipment to screen food imports, cargo, and travelers. This screening helps identify and resolve potential safety or security risks. FDA’s import tracking system has been programmed to automatically flag all shipments of FDA-regulated products from Japan, and the Agency maintains a registry of companies that prepare, pack, manufacture, or hold food for intended consumption in the U.S. FDA’s import staff will review each shipment of regulated goods originating from Japan and determine if it should be examined and sampled or released.

On March 22, 2011, in order to complement the measures taken by the Government of Japan and to strengthen the global food safety net regarding certain products, FDA issued Import Alert 99-33 regarding the importation of all milk and milk products and fresh vegetables and fruits produced or manufactured from the four Japanese prefectures of Fukushima, Ibaraki, Tochigi and Gunma.

Additionally FDA continues to work with its fellow member of the Federal Advisory Team for Environment Food and Health, including EPA, USDA and CDC. The Advisory Team is a radiological emergency response group of technical experts tasked with providing protective action recommendations to state and local governments on behalf of its member agencies.

If the U.S. government has any reason to believe that food coming into or produced in the U.S. has been tainted, they will keep it from entering into the stream of commerce.

Sources: FDA, CNN
By: Carol Kozlowski, CPIM, Manager of Crisis Management, RQA, Inc.

Testing for Radiation in Food

FDA has procedures and laboratory techniques for measuring radionuclide levels in food, and can also utilize the Food Emergency Response Network (FERN). FERN integrates the nation’s food-testing laboratories at the local, state, and federal levels into a network that is able to respond to emergencies involving biological, chemical, or radiological contamination of food. FDA is working with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to share resources and techniques for measuring contamination. FDA has the ability to measure contamination in products and issued guidance in 1998 regarding safe levels.

For those food and feed imports from the areas in proximity to the reactor but not covered by the import alert, FDA will:

- Conduct a field examination, including time/temperature changes, water damage.
- Collect a sample for radionuclide analysis at FDA laboratories.

For food and feed imports from Japan that originate outside the area of concern, FDA will:

- Collect a sample for any radiation pager reading significantly above background.
- As additional surveillance and as resources allow, collect other samples for radionuclide analysis as resources permit, for readings of 0 on the radionuclide pager.

Iodine-131 (I-131), Cesium-134 (Cs-134) and Cesium-137 (Cs-137) are the radionuclides of greatest concern to the food supply following a nuclear power plant accident. Along with these three radionuclides, FDA also monitors others as needed — among them, Strontium-90, Ruthenium-103 (Ru-103) and Ruthenium-106 (Ru-106).

Since the Fukushima nuclear accident, FDA has screened incoming food items for these radionuclides and others as needed. FDA also continually evaluates data and information from the accident and adjusts monitoring activities as needed.

As of Thursday, May 5, 2011, FDA import investigators had performed 9,634 field examinations for radionuclide contamination. FDA had tested 356 samples, 82 of which were seafood or seafood products. 355 samples had no Iodine-131, Cesium-134, Cesium-137, or other gamma-ray emitting radionuclides of concern. The FDA has deemed that based on current information, there is no risk to the U.S. food supply.

**Product:** Pacifiers  
**Incident:** Hazard–Choking

A Lutz, FL importer is voluntarily recalling about 29,000 infant pacifiers because they fail to meet federal safety standards and pose a choking hazard to young children. The recalled pacifiers were manufactured in China and sold at retail stores nationwide from April 2010 through February 2011. The pacifiers come in yellow, pink or blue colors and are made of silicone. They have an oval-shaped mouth guard and the brand name molded on to the handle side of the mouth guard. These pacifiers are sold two per package. So far no incidents or injuries have been reported. Consumers should immediately take the recalled pacifiers away from infants and contact the company for instructions on returning the product for a full refund or a $10 coupon toward the purchase of infant products. For additional information, consumers are asked to contact the company or visit the company’s website.

**Product:** Toy Activity Trucks  
**Incident:** Hazard–Choking

A San Diego, CA distributor, in cooperation with the CPSC and Health Canada, is recalling approximately 40,500 units (1,900 units in Canada) of toy activity trucks. The small sliding shapes on the activity truck’s bead runs can detach, posing a choking hazard to young children. The recall involves a motorized brightly colored plastic toy truck with flexible plastic tubing in orange and green. Items shaped like stars, circles, and hearts are attached to and slide along the tubes. The toy trucks were sold at specific retailers nationwide from Sept 2009-Feb 2011 and were manufactured in China. The distributor has received 28 reports in the US of the beads detaching, including 2 reports of young children gagging. Consumers should immediately take away the recalled toy from children and contact the company to receive a replacement toy. For more details, contact the company or visit the company’s website.

United States Department of Agriculture Recalls (www.usda.gov)

**Product:** Turkey Burger  
**Incident:** Possible Health Risk–Salmonella

A Willmar, MN establishment has recalled approximately 54,960 pounds of frozen, raw turkey burger products because they may be contaminated with Salmonella. Salmonella can cause serious and sometimes fatal infections in young children, frail or elderly people, and others with weakened immune systems. The 4 lb boxes of turkey burgers contain 12 1/3-pound individually wrapped burgers and were distributed to retail establishments nationwide. The FSIS was notified of a patient diagnosed with salmonellosis caused by Salmonella serotype Hadar. The investigation expanded to include 12 people in AZ, CA, CO, GA, IL, MI, MO, OH, WA, and WI who also have been diagnosed with Salmonella Hadar infection, with illnesses occurring between Dec 2010-March 2011. Three of the patients specifically reported eating this product prior to illness onset. Consumers and media with questions should contact the company directly.

**Product:** Pizza Products  
**Incident:** Possible Health Risk–Undeclared Allergen

A Montebello, CA establishment is recalling approximately 131,000 pounds of pizza products because they may contain an undeclared allergen, wheat. Wheat is a known allergen, which is not declared on the label. The 10-ounce packages of pizza products were produced on various dates between Jan. 27, 2011 and March 27, 2011. These products were shipped to a specific retailer nationwide. The problem was discovered by FSIS personnel during a routine inspection at the establishment. The inspector discovered that wheat was listed in the spice blend, but not declared in the ingredient statement of the finished product label. There have not been any reports of adverse reactions due to consumption of these products. Individuals concerned about an allergic reaction should contact a physician. Please contact the company with any further questions.

Food and Drug Administration Recalls (www.fda.gov)

**Product:** Chopped Clams  
**Incident:** Possible Health Risk–Undeclared Allergen

A San Diego, CA firm has issued a precautionary, voluntary recall of a limited amount of 6.5 ounce packages of chopped clams. The recalled product is mislabeled and may contain tiny shrimp. Shellfish is considered an allergen and people who have an allergy or severe sensitivity to shellfish run the risk of a serious or life-threatening allergic reaction if they consume this product. So far, there have been no reported illnesses. The chopped clams were distributed between Nov – Dec 2010 to retail distribution centers in PA, NY, VT, and VA. The firm has notified all of its customers who have received the mislabeled product and asked them to remove it from their shelves. Consumers who purchased the products are asked to return them to the store where they purchased it for a full refund. Consumers and media with questions should contact the company directly.

**Product:** Bread  
**Incident:** Possible Health Risk–Undeclared Allergen

A Cottage Grove, OR firm is recalling their 2 lb sourdough round, 24 oz oatmeal, and 16 oz baguette of garlic basil parmesan breads because they may contain undeclared pasteurized egg white. People who have an allergy or severe sensitivity to eggs run the risk of serious or life threatening allergic reactions if they consume these products. So far, no illnesses or allergic reactions have been reported to date. The recall was initiated after it was discovered that product containing pasteurized egg white was distributed in packaging that did not reveal the presence of pasteurized egg white on the label. The recalled bread was distributed at retail grocery and natural foods stores in Oregon. Those who have purchased these products should return them to the place of purchase a full refund. Consumers with further questions should contact the company for more details.

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