EFSA

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Process contaminants in vegetable oils and foods

Glycerol-based process contaminants found in palm oil, but also in other vegetable oils, margarines and some processed foods, raise potential health concerns for average consumers of these foods in all young age groups, and for high consumers in all age groups.

EFSA assessed the risks for public health of the substances: glycidyl fatty acid esters (GE), 3-monochloropropanediol (3-MCPD), and 2-monochloropropanediol (2-MCPD) and their fatty acid esters. The substances form during food processing, in particular, when refining vegetable oils at high temperatures (approx. 200°C).

The highest levels of GE, as well as 3-MCPD and 2-MCPD (including esters) were found in palm oils and palm fats, followed by other oils and fats. For consumers aged three and above, margarines and 'pastries and cakes' were the main sources of exposure to all substances.

Colistin: reduce use in animals, says EMA

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) has updated its 2013 scientific advice on the use in animals of the antibiotic colistin.

The new advice was requested by the European Commission following the discovery of a new mechanism of resistance in bacteria to colistin (caused by the mcr-1 gene), with the potential to spread rapidly.

EFSA contributed to the work of its sister agency by providing data submitted by EU Member States on the occurrence of resistance to colistin in E. coli and Salmonella from food and food-producing animals, taking part in meetings of the working group, and contributing to scientific discussions.

EMA experts advise that Member States minimise sales of colistin for use in animals, and that colistin be used only to treat clinical conditions for which there are no effective alternative treatments.

Public consultation on GM plant allergenicity guidance

EFSA has launched a public consultation on its draft guidance for the allergenicity assessment of genetically modified (GM) plants. Interested parties have until 25 September to submit comments on the draft document.

EFSA strives to include the latest scientific findings in its risk assessments and continuously monitors scientific developments to this end. The new guidance document on allergenicity reflects scientific advances as compared to the current guidance.

Updates in the guidance are based in part on extensive literature reviews, which revealed new methodologies that could be applied in allergenicity assessment. The new guidance also reflects recent EU legislation on GM food and feed by addressing new requirements for the authorisation of GM plants for the European market. These requirements refer to the inclusion of certain allergens in the compositional analysis of the allergenicity assessment of a GM plant.

EFSA decided to delay inclusion of guidance on in vitro digestibility studies for allergenicity assessment pending further evaluations.

The draft guidance on allergenicity assessment of GM plants is a milestone in EFSA's efforts to engage stakeholders in its scientific processes. An eight-member stakeholder focus group acted as a consultative body and contributed to the development of this guidance document from the start. This pilot project began with a workshop in June 2015. The involvement of the stakeholder focus group allowed EFSA to benefit from relevant expertise throughout the development of the guidance.

Efforts to engage with stakeholders will continue with a workshop on 23 November 2016 where feedback from the public consultation will be discussed. EFSA is organising this event in close collaboration with the focus group.

Public health risks of the Bacillus cereus group

EFSA experts have updated a 2005 scientific opinion on the risks to public health related to Bacillus cereus and other Bacillus species in food.

The Bacillus cereus group comprises eight species. One of these, Bacillus thuringiensis, is used as a biopesticide for insect control.

These naturally occurring, soil-borne bacteria can cause foodborne illnesses which usually result in vomiting and diarrhoea.

EFSA experts say that the only way to identify strains of Bacillus cereus group unambiguously is to determine their complete genome sequence. They recommend the use of whole genome sequencing techniques to collect relevant information as a prerequisite for further risk assessment.

The experts also recommend control options to manage risks caused by these bacteria. One of the most important options is to keep food refrigerated at a maximum temperature of 7C.

From 2007 to 2014, Member States reported 413 strong-evidence foodborne outbreaks associated with Bacillus cereus, which affected 6,657 people and caused 352 hospitalisations.

Food Safety News

http://www.foodsafetynews.com/

Study Finds Smartphones Can Improve Food Safety Inspections

Smartphones might be an important tool for food safety inspectors because of their inconspicousness. Researchers at Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences have found that phones used in place of clipboards can improve the quality of data collected during observations.

According to a phenomenon called the Hawthorne Effect, people sometimes change their behavior because they know someone is watching. For example, if a food handler sees a researcher or inspector with a clipboard, they know they're being watched and might adhere more strictly to safe handling practices than they regularly would. In this way, the Hawthorne Effect negatively impacts the quality of information collected.

But if the food handler hardly even notices the researcher or inspector looking at their phone (because so many people these days are looking at their phones), then the observer can covertly collect the information they need.

The Penn State researchers conducted a survey to assess public perceptions of smartphone use in a retail setting. Participants viewed images of individuals using either a smartphone or a clipboard in a retail environment and provided open-ended responses.

The results showed that 95 percent of participants associated images of clipboard use in a retail setting with research and inspection, but none said the images of smartphone use in the same setting suggested observation. The findings were published this month in Food Protection Trends.

The researchers also worked with a software developer to create an app for documenting direct concealed observations of food handlers, including the creation of checklists to record aspects such as hand hygiene, the adequacy of handwashing facilities, the temperature in coolers holding ready-to-eat foods and the presence of potentially hazardous foods. The app allows observers to easily add photos, audio, videos and open-ended notes to their reports.

Whole Foods, restaurants sold cheese linked to E. coli outbreak

Grassfields Cheese LLC of Coopersville, MI, is recalling about 20,000 pounds of organic cheeses due to possible contamination with Shiga toxin-producing E. coli (STEC). The recalled products have been linked to seven cases of E. coli infection. The family-owned company stated that it was voluntarily recalling the cheeses "out of an abundance of caution,"

E. coli that is infecting restaurant diners in Michigan matches bacteria found in recalled Grassfields Cheese products and has spurred public health officials to warn consumers nationwide because the cheese was also sold at retail stores and online.

FDA finds Listeria throughout onion processing plant in WA

Inspectors from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently found Listeria monocytogenes in an onion processing facility in Washington state where some wholesale vegetable products, recalled in April, may be linked to several illnesses.

A Pennsylvania frozen produce company has recalled an undisclosed volume of frozen, cut green beans because of potential contamination with Listeria monocytogenes.