

German eggs, poultry to be held for tests

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The food scare over contaminated egg products from Germany has spilled over to Hong Kong.

From yesterday, eggs and other poultry products imported from Germany will be held for dioxin tests under emergency measures.

Retailers have also been asked to halt sales of German eggs, and consumers are advised against eating eggs or poultry products from the country for about a week, pending the results of tests.

The emergency measures have been taken despite assurances from the European Union that no contaminated egg or poultry products - except for consignments to Britain through the Netherlands - have been exported to other countries.

The problem stems from German farms where animals were given feed containing dioxin, a cancer-causing chemical. Hong Kong food safety officials have cited reports from the European Union that the dioxin levels found were so low it was unlikely short-term consumption would pose a health hazard.

Centre for Food Safety controller Dr Constance Chan Hon-yea said: "The precautionary measures will be in place for a few weeks ... We shall hold and test all consignments of German eggs and poultry products." The tests take about a week.

Food safety officers took seven egg samples from markets on Sunday. One sample was confirmed to have come from Germany, but the origins of the rest are still unknown.

The measures announced yesterday came after criticism of confusing messages from food and health officials in the past few days.

As news of the tainted German eggs broke, Secretary for Food and Health Dr York Chow Yat-ngok last week sought to dismiss its impact by saying only 1 per cent of eggs in Hong Kong were from Germany. It was only after media reports of German eggs being sold in some markets that the Centre for Food Safety took samples.

Just hours before the emergency measures were announced, Chow told reporters of signs the "risk may have been under control", though he advised against eating German eggs.

Legislator Wong Kwok-hing, a member of the Legislative Council panel on food safety and environmental hygiene, criticised the government response. "People are confused. While you ask them not to eat the eggs, you say it is largely safe and there is no need to stop importing the product," Wong said, referring to Chow's comments. "If the eggs should not be consumed, what is the point of allowing them to be imported? And how safe are they?"

Hong Kong imports most of its eggs from the mainland and the United States. On average, 1.7 million eggs are imported from Germany a month, compared with the total monthly import of 150 million eggs.

Hong Kong Egg Merchants Association chairman Young Kam-yim said restaurants in the city seldom used eggs from Germany because they were too costly.