UN STRENGTHENS REGULATIONS ON MELAMINE, SEAFOOD, MELONS, DRIED FIGS AND LABELLING

4 July 2012 | Rome - The UN food standards body has agreed on new regulations – including the maximum level of melamine in liquid milk formula for babies – to protect the health of consumers across the world. Other measures adopted include new food safety standards on seafood, melons, dried figs and food labelling.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, jointly run by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and WHO, sets international food safety and quality standards to promote safer and more nutritious food for consumers worldwide. Codex standards serve in many cases as a basis for national legislation, and provide the food safety benchmarks for international food trade.

Melamine

Melamine can be lethal at high concentrations and has been used illegally to increase apparent protein content in food products including infant formula and milk powder. Milk tainted with melamine has caused death and illness in infants. Two years ago, the Codex Commission adopted a maximum melamine level of 1 mg/kg for powdered infant formula and of 2.5 mg/kg for other foods and animal feed. The Commission has now set a maximum limit of 0.15 mg/kg for melamine in liquid infant milk.

Melamine is used to make dishware and kitchenware, among other industrial applications. The new limit will help governments protect consumers by determining if detected levels of melamine result from unavoidable melamine contamination that does not cause health problems or from deliberate adulteration.

Dried figs and aflatoxins

Aflatoxins, a group of mycotoxins produced by molds, are toxic and are known to be carcinogenic. They can be found in a variety of products such as dried fruits, nuts, spices and cereals at high levels if the produce is not stored properly. The Commission now agreed a safe maximum limit of 10 micrograms/kg for dried figs, together with details on how test sampling should be conducted.

Melons

An emerging public health issue relates to the increased popularity of pre-cut melon slices. Exposed pulp of the fruit can become a breeding ground for bacteria. This has been linked to life-threatening salmonella and listeria outbreaks.
The Commission recommended that pre-cut melons should be wrapped or packaged and refrigerated as soon as possible and distributed at temperatures of 4⁰ C or less. Cooling and cold-storing was recommended as soon as possible after harvest, while knife blades used for cutting or peeling should be disinfected on a regular basis.

**Seafood and viruses**

Food hygiene in seafood, particularly for molluscs, such as mussels and oysters, have become a major food safety concern. The Commission adopted a set of preventive hygiene measures aimed to control food-borne viruses. Viruses are generally more resistant than bacteria and those transmitted by the faecal-oral route can persist for months in bivalve molluscs, soil, water and sediments. They can survive freezing, refrigeration, UV radiation and disinfection but are sensitive to heat.

Common food-borne viral diseases are caused by hepatitis A virus and norovirus. The Commission noted that the main hazard for the production of molluscs, such as oysters and mussels, was the biological contamination of the waters in which they grow.

It is therefore important to ensure the seawater quality of growing areas, the Commission noted. When there is a likelihood or evidence of viral contamination, closure of the area, destruction of contaminated molluscs and/or heat treatment before consumption of already harvested molluscs is recommended.

**Mandatory nutrition labeling**

Codex recommended that food manufacturers across the world label nutritional content on their products to ensure that consumers are better informed; the recommendation is in line with WHO’s Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health and is a major step forward in promoting healthy eating worldwide.

The 49-year-old Codex Alimentarius Commission, meeting from 2–7 July, is attended by 600 delegates representing 184 countries plus the European Union.

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**PEOPLE WITH DRUG DEPENDENCE NEED BETTER ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE**

26 June 2012 | Geneva - Most people with drug use disorders do not receive effective treatment and care, according to a new WHO information system that, for the first time, provides details on the resources allocated to the prevention and treatment of alcohol and drug-related problems in 147 countries. Until now, drug dependence has not been recognized as a health problem in many countries and stigma and discrimination associated with drug dependence have been major barriers to appropriate treatment.

**Lack of access to treatment**

“Drug dependence is a disorder that can be treated effectively but, unfortunately, the large majority of persons who need it do not have access to treatment,” says Dr Shekhar Saxena, Director of the Department for Mental Health and Substance Abuse. “The data presented in the new system illustrate the huge gaps that still exist in the area of drug dependence treatment. But more and more countries realize the benefits of treatment for drug and alcohol dependence, not only for the individuals themselves, but also for the society and the economy.”
According to new UN estimates, worldwide about 230 million adults (aged 15-64), or 5% of the adult population, used an illicit drug at least once in 2010, including about 27 million people with severe drug problems.

Data on funding, staff and services

The WHO Global Health Observatory Database – Resources for the Prevention and Treatment of Substance Use Disorders now provides such data for each country as funding, staff and services and thereby complements the already available information on scope and associated harms of substance use disorders. The country profiles included in the new system cover 88% of the world’s population.

“The availability of drug dependence treatment lags well behind treatment and care offered for other diseases according to our data,” explains Dr Vladimir Poznyak, Coordinator of the Management of Substance Use team at WHO. “For example, only 45% of the assessed countries are able to provide essential medicines to treat the dependence on heroin and other opiates and in almost half of the countries where treatment is available not more than one in 5 persons with drug use disorders benefits from the services. A quarter of the countries which identify opiates as the main drug problem do not offer the range of medications recommended by WHO.”

Low-cost treatment

Drug dependence is a disorder that can be treated effectively with low-cost medicines and standardized psychological therapies. In particular, the treatment of heroin dependence has been very successful in reducing HIV infection due to unsafe injection, crime and the risk of death through overdose.

WHO has been working closely with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) since 2009 to increase the access to treatment for people with drug use disorders. The understanding that drug abuse, at its core, is a public health issue has increased in recent years. However, only 82 countries offer special health services to people with drug use disorders.

With the launch of the new global information system WHO commemorates the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking celebrated by the UN every year on 26 June.

ILLUSTRATIONS, FIGURES, PHOTOGRAPHS

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