

Crying over spoilt milk

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But Singaporeans shouldn't be 'unduly concerned': Authorities

By Neo Chai Chin and Tan Hui Leng

THE phones have been ringing, and anxious parents knocking on doctors' doors.

Though local shelves have been emptied of China dairy imports, this has done little to assuage some Singaporeans' worries over whether they, or their children, are at risk from possibly having consumed melamine-laced products.

Just one day after a hotline number was announced for consumers to call, the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) received 380 calls and 400 emails.

Callers to the MediaCorp Hotline at 6822 2268 have also been spooked, with one claiming members of her family vomited after drinking a digestive milk product. A pregnant caller wondered if her kidney stones, contracted months ago, were due to tainted milk powder.

Clinics and hospitals have been fielding numerous queries, with the National University Hospital (NUH) even setting up a special clinic for worried parents and those with "genuine concerns".

But is so much fuss necessary?

In a press conference yesterday to address the public's fears, AVA chief executive Dr Chua Sin Bin and officials from the AVA, National Environment Agency and NUH explained why Singaporeans should not be "unduly concerned": Because the risk of melamine toxicity here is low.

The tainted infant formula that caused more than 50,000 children in China to fall ill contained "excessively high" melamine levels of up to 2,500 parts per million (ppm). In Singapore, the highest melamine levels detected were 160ppm, in the now-banned White Rabbit Creamy Candy, said Dr Chua.

To put things into perspective: Were you a 60kg adult, you would have to eat more than 47 White Rabbit sweets — or drink 815ml of China-made Dutch Lady strawberry flavoured milk, or chomp seven bars of YiLi Choice Dairy Frozen Yoghurt Bar with Real Fruit — every day over a lifetime to exceed the tolerable threshold. For a 30kg child, the values would be roughly half those.

If the melamine levels are not dangerous, then why destroy the products? The first batch of

contaminated items was sent to the Tuas Incineration Plant yesterday.

The AVA's response was that melamine is an adulterant and thus "will not be tolerated" in the food supply.

Five per cent of cream, 20 per cent of liquid milk and 0.02 per cent of powdered milk bought by consumers here is from China. Local manufacturers' use of China dairy products is also low.

Meanwhile, KK Women's and Children's Hospital told Today it has gotten 10 to 12 calls a day, and has seen two patients who had consumed milk from China. NUH has checked one child, while specialist call centre eMenders said that at least one customer had scheduled a check-up for her baby, who had consumed Monmilk.

At SingHealth Polyclinics, some have asked if the clinics offer screening for kidney stones.

GP Clarence Yeo has had about six enquires a day from parents about what to do if their children have consumed affected products. Said Dr Yeo: "The medical fraternity is waiting for some directives from the ministry on how we're to manage the situation from the medical standpoint ... For instance, what tests patients who have consumed certain foods within a certain time frame should go for."

So far, only powdered infant formula with excessively high levels of melamine has been linked to infant renal problems in China, said the AVA. This is not imported into Singapore.

But "just in case", the NUH yesterday started a temporary clinic to look into genuine concerns that might arise, such as from patients who had consumed melamine-tainted products every day. The clinic is staffed by a kidney specialist.

Symptoms to look out for in children include irritability and persistent crying, especially when passing urine. Blood may also be found in their urine and they may suffer from fever and nausea.

Melamine is an inert compound not toxic to the body. It can be excreted but, in large doses, may form kidney stones that can cause kidney failure.

The risks are much lower for grown-ups than for babies. To date, only babies and young children have been reported to be affected by melamine toxicity.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ALICIA WONG

FAQ on the milk ban

How long will the ban on milk and milk products from China last?

No timeframe has been set. The AVA will allow the sale of recalled products after the authority has run its battery of tests on all products. A product will be allowed for sale only when the authority is absolutely sure it is safe for consumption.

As to the ban on the import of such products, it will “depend on the performance of China” said the authority’s CEO, Dr Chua Sin Bin. The Chinese authorities would have to clearly show that issues of food safety have been resolved.

Why didn’t the AVA detect the presence of melamine in the affected products earlier?

Melamine is not allowed to be used in food. The contamination incidents in China resulted from the chemical being used to adulterate milk, so as to give a false impression of its protein content. Under normal circumstances, melamine would not be a hazard associated with milk and not routinely tested in food safety screening by the authorities worldwide.

A similar scandal last year involved the addition of melamine to pet food ingredients that China exported to the US. Didn’t that “tip” AVA off?

The pet food issue was “taken care of”, said Dr Chua — the Chinese took steps and spent a large sum of money beefing up their laboratories and acquiring certifications. Confidence in the system was built up. “This is something that is really out of the ordinary,” he stressed.

What is AVA doing about food safety now?

The AVA is testing milk and milk products from China for melamine. After this, it will move on to other food items from China in which protein is an important nutritional element; possible examples are cereal and soup. It is also inspecting bakeries, coffeeshops and school canteens to ensure that they are not using milk or milk products from China.

The AVA is considering making it mandatory for Chinese milk imports to come with an export certificate stating that the products have been tested for and are free of melamine.

Why are products, such as the affected Dutch Lady strawberry-flavoured milk, still on some shop shelves?

Products of the same brand may be manufactured in several different countries — in this item’s case, both China and Malaysia. All Dutch Lady products made in China have been recalled and will be destroyed, said Friesland Foods Singapore, which is giving refunds for affected items; Dutch Lady products made in other countries are safe for consumption.

Call its hotline at 6419 8466 if you have queries.

So, how can you be sure the milk/milk products you are buying are not from China?

Check the labels for the country of origin. If you see such products in retail shops, call the AVA hotline at 6325 7625.