No need for melamine contamination concern - CGCSA

The mere presence of melamine in foods does not indicate that the food is contaminated, the Consumer Goods Council (CGCSA) said today.

There are acceptable daily intake levels of melamine and as long as this is below the tolerable daily intake limit, the food will be safe, the CGCSA said in the wake of the Chinese contaminated milk saga.

The CGCSA has operated a Food Safety Initiative (FSI) for the past two years which continues to monitor the situation to ensure any melamine content does not exceed internationally-certified tolerable levels.

The FSI is in receipt of a number of melamine tests of products available in South Africa, none of which fa outside the limits set by the South African Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act; the Food and Dru Administration (FDA) in the USA; and the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA).

The FSI, run by world-renowned food scientist Prof Lucia Anelich, focuses on ensuring that the food we e is safe. There is a high level of co-operation and information sharing between the FSI, the Department of Health and other government departments concerned with the safety of South African food.

SA standards

There are a number of South African standards relating to food safety, not the least of which is the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, which stipulates the levels of contaminants and residues, su as pesticides, a food may contain.

Further work has been undertaken by international bodies such the World Health Organisation, FDA, EFSA and others, on establishing maximum levels of various substances in our foods. These are expressed in t ways:

- Limits of Detection (LOD): this relates to the amount of a substance that acceptable testing must adhere to, and is typically expressed in parts per million. Accredited testing laboratories must be able test to within these specifications.
- Tolerable Daily Intake (TDI): this is a level of a substance that can be safely consumed by a human, over prolonged periods, without any danger to their health.

The abovementioned food agencies have established maximum testing levels for melamine in a number c different tests, for various foods. It is important that any declarations made on test results are viewed agai the testing laboratory's capability of testing within these LODs.

Secondly, the mere presence of melamine in a food does not constitute a heath risk. It is the amount, expressed as milligrams per kilograms.

The FSI has received a communiqué from the US FDA:

“The US FDA has published an interim safety/risk assessment on melamine and structural analogues and has established for melamine a Tolerable Daily Intake of 0.63mg/kg body weight per day.”

The EFSA published a statement in September 2008, which states “EFSA has applied a TDI of 0.5mg/kg body weight in considering possible health effects which might occur with repeated consumption of melamine contaminated products over a relatively short period.”

Approved for use in packaging

Furthermore, the EFSA issued a Commission Directive related to materials and articles intended to come into contact with foodstuffs (such as bottles, packaging, etc) approves melamine for use as a monomer ar as an additive in plastics with a specific migration limit of 30mg/kg of food.

This deals with the fact that substances in packaging migrate to the food they hold. The Europeans have determined a maximum migration rate for melamine.

From the above it can be seen that the mere presence of melamine in foods is not proof that the food is/h been contaminated. Some of the levels found in foods tested in China and the East have levels varying fro 0.09mg/kg (acceptable) to 619mg/kg, which is clearly not acceptable.

The CGCSA says they will continue to work with the Department of Health in establishing TDIs and migrati limits for the South African market to ensure only safe food is sold in this country.