Very low risk of infection from chilled, frozen food: Experts

Global minimum standards for food handling to prevent pathogen transmission bound to ensure that

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It is possible to get Covid-19 from contaminated imported chilled or frozen food, but the risk is very low, said experts.

The coronavirus that causes Covid-19 remains viable for at least three weeks at 4 deg C, said Professor Dale Fisher, a senior consultant in the division of infectious diseases at the National University Hospital.

He recently concluded a study that involved putting the Sars-CoV-2 virus on prawn, salmon and pork, and testing its viability after three weeks – an ample timeframe for such food to be exported and sold, Prof Fisher said.

Transmission through imported food has become a hot topic following the re-emergence of Covid-19 in New Zealand after 102 days with no cases, leading to a lockdown in Auckland.

Six of those infected worked at a cold storage facility, raising the possibility that they may have contracted the disease from the imported food before spreading it to others.

China recently reported finding the virus on frozen chicken wings from Brazil, where the pandemic is raging, and on the outer packaging of frozen prawns from Ecuador.

In June, it said the virus was found in a Beijing market on a chopping board used to cut imported salmon. There was a cluster of more than 200 cases linked to the market.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong, deputy director of Duke-NUS Medical School’s emerging infectious diseases programme, said: “My sense is that although it is certainly possible for Sars-CoV-2 to be transmitted through improperly handled food, the risk is likely to be small.”

He explained that internationally accepted minimum standards for handling food to prevent transmission of pathogens would also prevent the transmission of this virus.

Associate Professor Han Li Yang, an infectious diseases doctor at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the probability of infection from handling food is infinitesimally small. The likelihood of being infected by another asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic person is far, far higher.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the school, said his bet is on infected people here catching the coronavirus from someone else rather than from imported food as there is a hidden reservoir of the virus here.

The Singapore Food Agency said it is monitoring developments closely and will take the necessary actions to safeguard food safety here, though there is no evidence to show the virus can be transmitted to people from food or food packaging.

It added: “In general, contact with food or food packaging and equipment is no different from contact with other non-food packaging and the environment, for example, common touch surfaces such as lift buttons, door knobs, etc.”

While agreeing that the risk is low, Prof Fisher said: “It is about seeding it to one person, and then human-to-human transmission takes over again.”

“We know food processing plants host clusters, so it is likely food becomes contaminated. We know the virus can survive the time and temperatures for the trip.”

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the risk to the average consumer is extremely low, but may be higher for people working in the chilled food plants handling imported products every day.

“But even for something where the chance is very small, when multiplied across the total number of chilled packages being shipped between locations, a few events will occur over time,” he said.

Prof Fisher said if infection from handling food has “happened a handful of times, then it fits with the concept of unlikely and not common”, but does not make it impossible.

Remaining people to wash their hands and cook their food well, he said that “the first person to take the frozen or refrigerated meat out of the box and then touch their mouth” could become a new index case.

Prof Ooi said: “The emphasis should be that proper hygiene matters both in food centres and at home to prevent common foodborne pathogens. The same hygiene standards should also protect the public from Covid-19, even in the event that the raw food is contaminated with Sars-CoV-2.”

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