No need to ban food from firms whose products had virus traces: Experts

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There is no need to ban imports from companies whose frozen food products have been contaminated with the coronavirus, say infectious diseases experts.

This is because the risk of transmission from a food source is very low, compared with the usual routes of infection.

Even so, people involved in food preparation should observe strict personal hygiene and ensure that surfaces and utensils are cleaned properly.

“I think the world should demand that food processing plants ensure Covid-safe standards,” said Professor Dale Fisher, a senior consultant at the National University Hospital’s infectious diseases division.

“On receiving food from overseas, handlers should practice regular hand hygiene and ensure surfaces and utensils are regularly cleaned.”

He added that the main risk is to workers handling such food, not consumers. But even for workers, infection through this route would still be “a very unlikely event”, said Prof Fisher.

Said Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, programme leader of infectious diseases and co-director of global health at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health: “There should be no change from prior advisories. Personal hygiene remains of critical importance in food preparation, as there are many other diseases that one is more likely to acquire from food preparation and consumption, compared to Covid-19.”

The issue has come under the spotlight in recent days, after China announced that it had found traces of the coronavirus on the packaging of frozen squid from Russia and frozen fish from Indonesia.

Indonesia has since suspended the company, Putri Indah, from exporting to China while it investigates the issue.

When asked if Putri Indah exports seafood products to Singapore, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) did not give a definite answer but referred The Straits Times to its website.

The site states that SFA is not aware of any evidence that suggests the virus can be transmitted via food, food packaging or equipment used to handle food.

The agency will continue to monitor developments closely, and take any action necessary to safeguard food safety here.

Dr Jasmin Lim, a lecturer at Republic Polytechnic’s School of Applied Science, said that seafood typically goes through four stages in the supply chain.

It is first harvested, then processed, before being packaged and put in cold storage. It is then transported to distribution centres and, eventually, retail stores.

Depending on how many steps there are in the supply chain, food can change hands multiple times, she added.

For instance, a producer may sell to a local wholesaler, who then exports this as raw material to be processed overseas. This processor in turn sells to its own local distributor.

Prof Fisher said what is presently known is that the coronavirus can survive weeks when frozen or refrigerated at 4 deg C in a laboratory. Food processing plants have also been the sites of large Covid-19 clusters around the world, he added.

“What is unclear is whether virus that originated in one country was transported and survived at an adequate dose to cause infection in people in China.”

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