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WHO says...

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There is no evidence that people can catch Covid-19 from cooked food, according to the WHO. The virus causing Covid-19 can be killed at temperatures similar to those at which other known viruses and bacteria are killed. Thus, food such as eggs and all meat... should be cooked to at least 70 deg C.

The Singapore Food Agency says on its website that it is "not aware of any evidence" suggesting that the virus can be transmitted to people via food or food packaging and equipment. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Can Covid-19 spread through frozen food or food packaging?

Experts say risk of such transmission is low, but practising good personal hygiene still key

Cheryl Tan

Following recent reports that Sars-CoV-2 – the virus responsible for Covid-19 – was found on frozen beef and tripe in China, The Straits Times looks at how frozen food and food facilities could be possible modes of transmission and the risk of contracting the virus in such a manner.

Q Should I be worried about contracting the Covid-19 virus through frozen food or food packaging?

A The World Health Organisation (WHO) has said it is unlikely for people to contract Covid-19 from food or food packaging, and that transmission via contaminated food is not a major infection route.

Likewise, the Singapore Food Agency posted on its website that it is "not aware of any evidence" suggesting that the virus can be trans-

mitted to people via food or food packaging and equipment.

However, it added that contact with these items is "no different" from contact with common surfaces such as lift buttons and door knobs, which could be easily contaminated with the virus. The risk of possible transmission through these surfaces remains low. Still, it is important to maintain good personal hygiene.

Q Should Singapore be screening all of its frozen food imports?

A No, as the risk of transmission from frozen food is low.

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, said: "At present, the cost of screening all frozen goods is high relative to the potential benefit, and other routes of transmission are more likely and present a higher risk."

He added that Singapore could consider screening all its frozen food if it is ultimately aiming for zero Covid-19 cases and after it has accounted for and controlled all

S'pore researchers studying longevity of virus

An ongoing study by local researchers found that the Sars-CoV-2 virus, which causes Covid-19, could survive – in sufficiently high amounts – on frozen fish, chicken and pork for three weeks at refrigeration temperature.

Co-led by Dr Danielle Anderson, scientific director of the Duke-NUS Medical School ABSL3 laboratory, in collaboration with Professor Dale Fisher from the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, the study was conducted to test the "longevity and infectivity of Sars-CoV-2" in refrigerated and frozen food.

High amounts of the virus were used to infect pieces of salmon, chicken and pork sourced from local supermarkets.

The samples were stored at three different temperatures: 4 deg C (refrigeration temperature), minus 20 deg C (freezer temperature) and minus 80 deg C (deep freezer temperature generally used in labs to preserve the virus) respectively.

The samples were then harvested at specified time points

other common routes of virus transmission and importation.

Q What are the implications of the virus persisting on the packaging of these frozen goods and should people be wary of frozen food imports?

A Professor Dale Fisher, senior consultant at the division of infectious diseases at National University Hospital, said there is circumstantial ev-

reflecting food transport timelines. It was found that the virus was able to survive and remain infectious at refrigeration and freezer temperatures, that is, 4 deg C and minus 20 deg C respectively, for three weeks.

Hence, it is possible for the virus to survive transport and storage which occur in controlled settings with consistent temperature and humidity levels, comparable to a laboratory setting.

The study also noted that an infected food handler could be an index case to a new outbreak, and such an event – though unlikely – could still occur from time to time.

The team has recently been awarded a research grant from the World Health Organisation to further its study. The team is now testing lower amounts of virus on food packaging to replicate transmission occurring through an infected worker contaminating the food or its packaging.

They are also studying the possibility of infection by consuming food that has been contaminated with the Covid-19 virus.

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idence showing that food handlers may become infected from imported virus on fresh or frozen food. However, by the time packaged food gets to consumers, there is almost no chance that the virus would still be on the packaging. Even if it were, there would have to be an adequate infective dose for this to be a route of transmission.

Dr Danielle Anderson, scientific

director of the Duke-NUS Medical School ABSL3 laboratory, said that there is currently no definitive evidence of people being infected from food packaging. As a safety precaution, people should ensure they cook food thoroughly and wash their hands well after handling raw food, as this can also help prevent food-borne diseases.

Q Can the Covid-19 virus be spread through cooked food?

A There is no evidence that people can catch Covid-19 from cooked food, according to the WHO. The virus causing Covid-19 can be killed at temperatures similar to those at which other known viruses and bacteria are killed. Thus, food such as eggs and all meat – including poultry – should be cooked to at least 70 deg C.

Q Should we be worried about food processing and cold storage facilities? Are they a hot spot for the virus to spread?

A Given that the virus tends to survive longer in colder temperatures, the conditions at these facilities tend to be more favourable for its transmission and spread.

Dr Anderson feels that the facilities are a concern as workers are often in close proximity to one another. Masks may also become damp and ineffective at colder temperatures. She noted that many of these workers fear losing their jobs if they take days off, making them more likely to go to work even when sick.

All workplaces, including local food processing facilities, have to adhere to safe management measures. Employers who fail to do so may face stop-work orders or financial penalties.

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