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PAULINE CHIOU/CNN

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Radiation and Japanese food safety



Posted by:

Pauline Chiou, World Business Today Anchor

Hong Kong, China (CNN) – My 10-month old daughter loves hard boiled eggs. I buy Japanese eggs to mix into her solids. Here in Hong Kong, I go to Japanese supermarkets to do my grocery shopping. I trust the quality. Then a relative from abroad called this week and asked if I was certain Japanese produce was safe.

Well, that's a tough question to answer at this point. I do know it's a question a lot of families are starting to ask.

Japanese food is hugely popular worldwide, stocking shelves at high-end stores around Asia and specialty shops in Europe and the U.S. Governments are taking precautions by doing thorough inspections of Japanese produce. Hong Kong's Center for Food Safety has already conducted radiation tests on at least 34 samples of fresh vegetables, meat and fish from Japan. The center reports all test results were satisfactory.

"As far as radiation is concerned, I think the most at-risk articles are those fresh products, perhaps dairy products, fresh fruits and vegetables," said Dr. York Chow, Hong Kong's Secretary for Food and Health, at a news conference earlier this week. "In case we detect anything, of course, we will ban those products from Hong Kong."

Thailand's government is focusing on Japanese imports of meat, milk, fish and seaweed. A radiation physicist from the Office of Atoms for Peace has told CNN the agency will work with Thailand's Health Ministry to do random checks of imported food from Japan. On Tuesday, India also ordered radiation tests of Japanese food at its ports and airports. Only food originating from Japan after March 11 will be tested.

Paul Yang lives in Tokyo, where he grew up, and is a father with two young children. He and his wife are not changing their family's eating habits, he said.

"I am not worried about the safety of Japanese produce," Yang said. "The majority of farm produce and agricultural products come from warmer areas, therefore further away from the Fukushima area (where the nuclear reactor is)." "Also, many of the products are labeled with their origin of production so we would know if it is from Fukushima. Right now, the radiation level within 20 to 30 kilometers (12 miles to 18.6 miles) of Fukushima is high, but as soon as you move away from the origin of radiation, the effects of it fall dramatically, actually exponentially," Yang says. "The closest location that produces significant amounts (of fresh produce) for Tokyo, for example, is Chiba or Ibaraki prefectures, which is approximately 150 to 200 kilometers (93 miles to 124 miles) from Fukushima."

While Yang is not worried, the perception of possibly tainted produce is already having a knock-on effect. Kirby Daley, senior strategist of Newedge Group, said this week on CNN's World Business Today program: "We're already hearing talk in our office about women stopping to buy Japanese cosmetics. We're talking about Japanese food imports being stopped and we're not going to be trusting the sushi."

"These are all anecdotal, but this is what will weigh on the economy for a long time," Daley said. "And the economy is not that strong to start with."

Peter McGuire, an independent market strategist based in Australia, says it's too early to say whether the quality of Japanese food will change because many products shipped before the earthquake are still on store shelves. "We just have to see the severity of this. It's so hard to speculate." One item that's selling out: Japanese baby formula. In Hong Kong, many parents bought extra boxes of the formula manufactured before Friday's earthquake and tsunami.

Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director of Center for Science in the Public Interest in the United States, answered various questions from CNN via email. She says she is not concerned about Japan's food safety for two main reasons: 1) Japan is a net importer of food and 2) Japan has one of the best food safety systems in the world.

De Waal also compared today's Fukushima situation with the 1986 Chernobyl accident and its impact on food.

"Following the 1986 Chernobyl accident, the U.S. tested nearly 8900 samples of both animal and non-animal based imported foods coming from the affected area over a five year period," De Waal said. "They found 1.4% (of imported foods) were contaminated above the regulatory limits, with the majority of these being in the animal products side. They also tested samples of food from U.S. Embassies in the region and found the highest numbers of positive samples in vegetables (both leafy and non-leafy), some fruit and spices."

"Chernobyl was a much worse disaster, as the cloud went over a large agricultural area of Europe. Therefore, these findings are illustrative of a worse case scenario, not the current situation involving food exports from Japan."

She does caution that the most vulnerable agricultural sectors during a nuclear emergency are dairy and vegetables. "It is important that all food animals in the affected areas be sheltered along with their food and water sources," DeWaal said. Cooking or boiling radiation-contaminated food does not make the food safe to eat, she said.

Most experts seem to be in agreement that the biggest confidence-builder is Japan's strict food regulations. Jean-Yves Chow, a senior food and agribusiness research analyst at Rabobank International, says Japan's food safety standards are "one of the highest in the world." But Chow does add, "In food safety, zero risk does not exist."

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Marc

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soundoff (4 Responses)

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This will be probably the main difference between Chernobyl and japan since no one returned well not that i know of to that relative area Ukraine farming etc. for probably who know how many miles. But japan has great food from its volcano terrain good for farming but now its well test everything where ever you are in Japan. Food contamination will be the second most expensive thing behind the health effect of radiation itself. Money cannot fix this. the area for farming becomes deserted. Japan Doesn't have whole lotta land like around chernobyl. and chernobyl as far as i know wasnt in earth quake zone so the tomb its in is pretty stable. And its going to be hard to maintain a tomb in earth quake zone but it will be able to be cooled constantly by the ocean water not like chernobyl.

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March 17, 2011 at 5:28 am |

Khamal khashy

My question is what is the Government and the UN doing about this Japan EarthQuark?

March 17, 2011 at 5:30 am |

maki1

I live in Japan and the comment from the man in Tokyo about food being labeled where it is from is misleading. Lets take fish for example, a fishing vessel that leaves Nagoya port in the south and travels north to say Miyagi prefecture, and returns with a catch full of fish. The origin of those fish will not be labeled as Miygai but rather Nagoya. So for those who live in Japan, be cautious about that whole origin label without at least studying the rules and regulations.

March 17, 2011 at 7:14 am |

maki2

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March 17, 2011 at 7:16 am |

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