

FHB's response to impact of tear gas on health and food safety

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) made the following response today (November 21) regarding the recent public concerns about the impact of tear gas on health and food safety:

The Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, said, "I fully understand the public's concern on the impact of tear gas on health and food safety. In this connection, the FHB has earlier sought advice from relevant experts. Subsequently, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) under the Department of Health (DH) and the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department have respectively provided health information on tear gas and advice on contaminants and food safety."

On the health effects of tear gas, in general, post-exposure symptoms to tear gas may include stinging and burning sensation to eyes and other mucous membranes, tearing, salivation, runny nose, tight chest, headache, nausea, burning sensation of skin, and erythema of skin. These symptoms will usually disappear within a short time after exposure to tear gas. According to the Hospital Authority (HA), amongst those who were exposed to tear gas and attended the accident and emergency (A&E) departments of HA, they generally experienced mild respiratory and skin irritation, and there was no serious health impact reported. Most of them could be immediately discharged after rinsing and receiving treatment at the A&E departments.

Some members of the public enquired how the residual materials could be removed. Advices from the DH include: disposable cleaning items are preferable. Suitable personal protective equipment such as masks, rubber gloves and rubber aprons should be worn. In general, surface with residual materials could be wiped by cloth soaked with soapy water but hot water should not be used in order to avoid evaporating the materials. Also, residual materials should not be stirred up and therefore tools such as high pressure water jet and brooms, as well as electric fans, should not be used. The disposable cleaning items should be properly packed (such as in a sealed plastic bag) after cleaning and then disposed.

Details in the cleaning of residual materials are available in the health information prepared by the CHP (www.chp.gov.hk/en/healthtopics/content/460/102308.html).

On food safety, the CFS has earlier on offered advice to the public on contaminants and food safety. CFS's advice is available on its website. (www.cfs.gov.hk/english/whatsnew/whatsnew_fstr/files/Advice_on_tear_gas_for%20public_e.pdf)

In addition, the CFS has provided advice to the food trade on how to minimise food contamination by contaminants, including chemical substances of tear gas. The CFS advises the trade that food should be properly stored in

suitable places such as clean and covered food-grade containers to reduce the risk of food contamination.

"I know the public would like to learn more about the situation at the Yau Ma Tei Fruit Market. The CFS staff have visited the market to provide food safety information to traders and advised them to take appropriate preventive measures. Insofar as the general public is concerned, generally speaking, contaminants on the surface of some kinds of food, such as fruits or vegetables, can be reduced by washing with running water. For the sake of prudence, food suspected to be contaminated or showing abnormality should not be consumed."

"The FHB will continue to exchange views with relevant experts and to provide in a timely manner up-to-date information and advice to the public from the public health perspective," stressed Professor Chan.