

Tainted frozen food sickens hundreds in Japan (Update)

January 8 2014, by Elaine Kurtenbach



In this Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2014 photo, the notice of apology and recall is placed on the shelves of frozen food products at a supermarket in Fujisawa, near Tokyo. More than 350 people have been sickened across Japan after eating frozen food products that may have been tainted with a pesticide, Japanese public broadcaster NHK reported. Food maker Maruha Nichiro Holdings began recalling 6.4 million packages of various frozen foods on Dec. 29, saying it found some were tainted by high levels of pesticides. The company has received hundreds of thousands of calls about the problem. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

Hundreds of people fell sick across Japan after eating frozen food that may have been tainted with a pesticide.

Food maker Maruha Nichiro Holdings used full-page ads in major newspapers Wednesday apologizing and warning consumers not to eat any of the tainted food, including pizza, croquettes and pancakes manufactured at a factory in Gunma Prefecture, north of Tokyo.

The company began recalling 6.4 million packages of various frozen foods on Dec. 29, saying it found some were tainted by high levels of malathion, a pesticide.

Maruha has received hundreds of thousands of calls about the problem.

"The products will have a strong smell and eating them may cause vomiting and stomach pain," it said in the notice, which included 51 color photos of the problem products.

The health ministry said it had confirmed 556 people suffering such symptoms after eating those products as of late Tuesday. In a notice on its website, it ordered Maruha Nichiro to recall all potentially affected products and to be forthright in informing the public about the situation.

Estimates of the number of people affected vary. Public broadcaster NHK said Wednesday that its tally found 1,700 people sickened after eating the Maruha products, while Kyodo News agency put the number at 1,400. Earlier, NHK said information from local governments showed 356 people were affected.



In this Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2014 photo, the notice of apology and recall is placed on the shelves of frozen food products at a supermarket in Fujisawa, near Tokyo. More than 350 people have been sickened across Japan after eating frozen food products that may have been tainted with a pesticide, Japanese public broadcaster NHK reported. Food maker Maruha Nichiro Holdings began recalling 6.4 million packages of various frozen foods on Dec. 29, saying it found some were tainted by high levels of pesticides. The company has received hundreds of thousands of calls about the problem. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

Both reports said it was unclear whether consumption of the tainted products was directly responsible for the illnesses, suggesting a possibility of some public hysteria. The health ministry said it had not

detected malathion in nearly three dozen cases tested.

Tokyo-based Maruha Nichiro said it had so far retrieved about 1.1 million packages subject to the recall.

Last week, it issued a formal apology and appealed to consumers not to eat any of the affected products. Police are investigating how the items were contaminated with malathion, reportedly by up to 2.6 million times the allowable limit.

Malathion is a pesticide used in farming and gardening, and to kill fleas on animals and people. At high enough concentrations, it can cause death, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

There have been no reports of life-threatening illnesses from Maruha's products, but the contamination has further shaken public confidence undermined by various food quality scandals.

Late last year, a slew of top-notch hotels and department stores apologized after it was found that some of the items they were selling were actually cheaper substitutes.

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