

Use only ice to preserve fish, warn watchdogs

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The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India and the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin, in their jointly prepared 'guidance note' has asked the fish traders to strictly use ice as preservative for interstate fish import, warning that if any traders are found adding formalin intentionally or unintentionally then they will be punished.

The document called 'guidance note', which was released recently following the public outcry over the presence of formalin, stresses on ethical business practices needed to be followed by individual traders and retailers in supply chain, ensuring no formaldehyde is added in the fish.

It advises them to ensure integrity of fish and fish products throughout storage, transportation and supply process and screened the fish consignments for formaldehyde content during procurement.

The guidance note, which is available on the FSSAI website, clearly says that formaldehyde is banned for use in foods in the country as per the Food Safety and Standards Regulations of 2011.

The FSSAI has said that consumption of fish adulterated with formalin causes severe abdominal pain, vomiting, coma, renal injury, and in some cases, even death.

The note asks the consumers to wash fish with running tap water to help remove formaldehyde to a large extent and cooking thoroughly at the temperature of 75 degree Celsius or above as cooking aid in the removal of chemicals.

Also, the flesh should be checked to see whether it has turned opaque and can be separated easily.

It also advises the people to use the readily available test kits, developed by the CIFT to detect added formalin in the fish which will be made commercially available at Rs 2-3 within a week.

"The kits are a preliminary test and samples must be sent to labs for final confirmation," it reads.

The guidance note says that formaldehyde is one of the top 25 most widely produced chemicals, and hence fish suppliers and retailers have easy access to this chemical for adulteration.

It further says that formalin is a common fish adulterant. Traders and suppliers use it to extend the shelf life of both fresh and frozen fish, as well as to artificially improve its appearance due to unavailability of quality ice, inadequate insulation during domestic transport and lack of warehousing facility.

Interestingly, its usage is not permitted in Australia, Europe and Japan due to its carcinogenic effect. But in Scandinavian countries it is used as bacteriostatic agent for cheese preparation and parasitic agent for the cultured fish and as an antifungal to control aquatic fungi.

The document has also laid down procedures and methods to be followed by food testing labs to confirm presence of formaldehyde.

The advisory asks them to avoid any methods that involve steam distillation or treatment with strong acids for extraction.

Food testing labs should ensure that fish samples collected for formaldehyde detection do not come in direct contact with ice. Edible portions of fish (muscle along with skin) should be used.