

Heads of Environmental Health Services (England)

Directors of Trading Standards

Chief Port Health Officers

cc: LACORS

CIEH

APHA

HPA

1st July 2005

Reference: ENF/E/05/027

Dear Colleagues

**SPORADIC CASES OF SCOMBROTOXIC POISONING ASSOCIATED
WITH TUNA**

Over recent months the Agency has received reports of sporadic cases of scombrototoxin poisoning (histamine poisoning) from several parts of the country. These cases have been confirmed by the Health Protection Agency.

This toxin is usually associated with the Scombridae family of fish, such as tuna or mackerel, and forms in food when spoilage bacteria produce a complex mixture of compounds responsible for scombrototoxin poisoning, when time and temperature permit their growth. The toxin can be distributed in the food in varying degrees and chemical testing is the only method to confirm its presence. From investigation into these sporadic cases, there are links to the handling of tuna and, in particular, to sandwiches. Although initially, it was considered that packaging of the tuna might be a problem, further investigations revealed that the levels of histamine were excessive after packs had been opened, the contents cooked and/or had been added to mayonnaise for sandwich filling.

Many food business operators might be unaware of this particular problem and hence not ensuring proper temperature control of the product during storage and after preparation.

Scombrototoxic poisoning can be avoided by ensuring that raw fish used as an ingredient is kept as fresh as possible by storing in ice, by proper refrigeration or by freezing at the normal recommended temperatures. Defrosting of frozen product should be carried out by refrigeration or microwave.

Subject to a food business operator's knowledge of food safety issues, you might consider that this particular concern relating to proper temperature control of fish and fishery products should be addressed when premises, such as restaurants or high street sandwich makers, are inspected. You might also be aware, for example, that the British Sandwich Association's Code of Practice for Sandwich Manufacturing recommends for members a point of sale cabinet temperature of 5⁰C, and a shelf-life of production plus two days. In this regard, the current Regulation 10 of the Food Safety (Temperature Control) Regulations 1995 would appear to be the most appropriate requirement and from 1 January 2006, consideration could be given to Annex II, Chapter IX (5) and (6) of Regulation (EC) 852/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs. Obviously, other factors will come into play, such as any procedures that might be in place to control other identified hazards.

In the light of these sporadic cases, the Agency would welcome your support in ensuring that food business operators are made aware of potential problems relating to fish of the Scombridae family when your officers inspect.

Yours sincerely

Julie Monk
Head of Enforcement Division