

## Food Contamination - Melamine in China

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The Department of Health has been working closely with FSANZ, other Australian jurisdictions, New Zealand and Local Governments to address the potential distribution of melamine contaminated milk and milk products originating from China.

Melamine is used in the plastics industry and should not be used in food. It is an organic base chemical most commonly found in the form of white crystals rich in nitrogen. Trace levels of melamine may be present in low levels in foods due to leaching from food-grade contact materials, such as plastic packaging, but these levels are not a health concern. Melamine has allegedly been used in China to make milk, which has had water added to increase its volume, appear higher in protein than it really is as the tests used to check protein levels in milk powder measure nitrogen content.

Chinese health officials advised that melamine has been found in baby formula and in other Chinese dairy products. The contaminated milk powder may be linked to kidney problems found in Chinese infants and a number of infant deaths.

As a result, the Australian jurisdictions are testing a targeted range of other products from China containing dairy as a minor ingredient. More than 120 products have been tested so far.

Test results to date have not detected the presence of melamine in any of these products, except for White Rabbit lollies, Lotte biscuits, Kirin Milk Tea, Orion Tiramisu cake, Dali Yuan brand First Milk vanilla flavoured drink. The products with levels detected have either been voluntarily withdrawn or recalled depending on potential health risks. FSANZ and the Australian jurisdictions have also coordinated a longer term survey which commenced in late October.

FSANZ has advised that a level of 1 mg/kg for infant formula and 2.5 mg/kg in foods containing dairy-based ingredients is appropriate and levels exceeding this are indicative of adulteration. These levels are comparable with those set by other international agencies.

For infant formula, even at relatively low levels of adulteration an infant will quickly exceed the Tolerable Daily Intake for melamine, if formula is the predominant food source. Foods with low levels of dairy based ingredients, such as candies and biscuits, are likely to be infrequently consumed and in small amounts so they are not considered to be a high-risk food for potential dietary exposure to melamine even if the dairy ingredient has been adulterated.

The WHO has called an expert meeting to review the toxicological aspects of melamine and cyanuric acid which is to be held in December.

**For further information see:**

[www.foodstandards.com.au](http://www.foodstandards.com.au)

OR

[www.who.int/foodsafety/en](http://www.who.int/foodsafety/en)

**References:**

1. Melamine and Cyanuric acid: Toxicity, Preliminary Risk Assessment and Guidance on Levels in Food (25 September 2008). World Health Organisation
2. Risk assessment and referral levels for dairy foods and foods containing dairy-based ingredients adulterated with melamine. 2008. FSANZ.

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