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Press Statement **21 July 2016**

CAP: Ban animal-based L-cysteine

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) calls on the Ministry of Health to ban animal based L cysteine and impose mandatory labeling of this substance in products sold in Malaysia.

According to the 11th Schedule of the Food Regulations 1985, the use of L-cysteine is allowed in wheat flour and high-protein flour for bread-making.

Malaysian delicacies such as bread, roti canai, roti jala, puri and pau which are made from flour could contain L- cysteine, a food additive that is derived from human and animal sources such as hair, feathers bristle and hooves.

The use of L-cysteine in food is of concern to Muslims and vegetarians. According to Syariah laws, consuming any part of the human body is Haram to Muslims. As such, food which contains L-cysteine is doubtful as it could be obtained from human hair.

L-cysteine is an amino acid used in the food, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industry.

In food industry L-cysteine is used as a dough conditioner and flavour enhancer. It is used as flour additives to break up the gluten in flour, thus reducing its stickiness and facilitating the kneading of the dough.

In bread making, L-cysteine is used to reduce the mixing time of the flour dough, stop the shrinking of pizza crust after it is flattened, and help in the movement of the dough through various bakery processing equipment or dough conditioners.

In addition, L cysteine is used in the food industry to produce meat flavours in products such as stock cubes.

Even though L- cysteine is present in a number of foods, consumers are unable to know as it is not listed as an ingredient. This is because L-cysteine is regarded not as a food additive but as a processing aid, which is not required to be labeled under the Food Act.

China is the largest L-cysteine producer in the world; it has an important position in the global market, which benefits from its relatively loose environmental requirement and ample raw materials. In 2012, it produced about 7,700 tonnes of L-cysteine and about 85% of them were exported to Southeast Asia, the US and Europe.

In China L-cysteune is extracted from human hair and chicken feathers. Most of the hair used to make L-cysteine is gathered from the floors of barbershops and hair salons in China, The hair is dissolved in acid and L-cysteine is isolated through a chemical process. One ton of hair yields 100 kg of L-cysteine and it requires 27 kg of hydrochloric acid to extract 1 kg of hair.

Besides human hair, other sources of L-cysteine include chicken feathers, duck feathers, cow horns and petroleum byproducts. Even though feathers are the easiest way to produce L- cysteine, it suffers from a low yield, unpleasant odor and problem of waste treatment.

According to a report, the major source of L-cysteine today, is hog hair. It is estimated that hog hair is the source of 90% of the Chinese L-cysteine supply.

Synthetic and microbial versions of L-cysteine exist but has approximately 10% total market share, because they are more costly to produce than hair or feather derived L-cysteine.

As the consumption of L-cysteine is a taboo to Muslims and vegetarians, CAP calls on the Ministry of Health to ban animal based L cysteine and impose mandatory labeling of this substance in food, pharmaceutical and cosmetic products.

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