

21/2013, 2 August 2013

Spices and Herbs: A Risk-free Taste Experience

The BfR coordinates an EU project for the safety of the food supply chain of herbs and spices

From aniseed, basil and cinnamon to curry, paprika and pepper: spices and herbs enrich the taste variety of our food. Although only used in small quantities they are part of numerous dishes. In addition, spices and herbs are often added to foods without any further heating. In that case, possible contaminations might not be reduced. “To ensure that spices and herbs do not constitute a health risk to consumers, contaminations with bacteria, fungi, toxins and chemical substances must be avoided along the entire supply chain”, states Professor Dr. Dr. Andreas Hensel, President of the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR). The EU project SPICED aims at collecting data, which can be used as a basis for the assessment of the safety of spices and herbs. At the same time, measures will be developed to ensure the safety of spices and herbs. The three-year research project is coordinated by the BfR and started in July 2013. Project partners include government agencies, research institutions as well as relevant companies and associations from Germany, Austria, Latvia, the Netherlands, Hungary, Ireland, and Slovakia. It is financed by the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission.

Most of the spices and herbs processed in the EU are imported from countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, India, Turkey, and China. Within the EU, Hungary and Romania are the main producers of spices, whereas herbs are mainly grown in France, Italy and Greece. In the European Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF), the product category “Herbs and Spices” is listed as number four in the ranking of the most frequent product alerts: overall, about 75 percent of these reports are due to improper composition (e.g. addition of illegal dyes) or contaminations with mycotoxins and pathogenic microorganisms (e.g. *Salmonella*). All these types of contaminations could affect the health of the consumer.

The aim of the project “Securing the spices and herbs commodity chains in Europe against deliberate, accidental or natural biological and chemical contamination” (SPICED) is to improve the safety and security of the entire food supply chain for spices and herbs, i.e. from the cultivation or their import into Europe to processing, trading and consumption (“From-farm-to-fork-approach”).

The research focuses on herbs and spices, which are most commonly used in the EU. Global herb and spice supply chains will be investigated in particular and critical points, where biological and chemical contamination might occur, will be identified and examined.

The project SPICED aims to help at avoiding contaminations of spices and herbs and pointing out possibilities for damage mitigation. The risks arising from natural, accidental and deliberate contaminations of these minor food components are taken into account. The results of the research project will be published and made available to the relevant stakeholders.

About the BfR

The Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) is a scientific institution within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV). It advises the Federal Government and Federal Laender on questions of food, chemical and product safety. The BfR conducts its own research on topics that are closely linked to its assessment tasks.

ende bfr-p