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June 2007: Pufferfish and Monkfish

On May 24, 2007 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) generated a warning claiming that puffer fish containing a deadly toxin called tetrodotoxin may have been mislabeled as monkfish.

FDA became aware of this situation when two people in Chicago area became ill (one person hospitalized) after consuming homemade soup containing the mislabeled fish. It was odd because Monkfish does not contain tetrodotoxin. The FDA's investigation confirmed the presence of potentially life-threatening levels of tetrodotoxin.

According to the FDA, the mislabeled product was imported and distributed by Hong Chang Corporation from Santa Fe Springs, California. The company distributed a total of two-hundred eighty two 22-pound boxes filled with individually wrapped puffer fish in plastic bags with no labels to Illinois, California, and Hawaii beginning in September 2006. The boxes were labeled "Frozen Monkfish Guttled and Head-off" and "Product of China."

Tetrodotoxin poisoning is characterized initially by tingling of the lips and tongue. These initial symptoms occur 30 minutes to several hours after eating food containing the toxin. Subsequent symptoms may include tingling of the face and numbness, as well as headache, balance problems, excessive salivation, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain. In severe cases, muscles can become paralyzed, and death may follow from respiratory muscle paralysis. Anyone experiencing these symptoms should seek immediate medical care and are encouraged to report their illness to local health department.

Tetrodotoxin is not destroyed by common food preparation or storage, such as cooking or freezing. FDA allows puffer fish to be imported into the United States only under strict provisions that minimize the risk of the toxin being present in the fish. If you are unsure of the source, you should contact your local or state health department for more information. The FDA is examining all entries from the Chinese supplier and will take necessary action.

Five minutes a day of staff training would make all the difference. Why don't you try various methods to incorporate training into your work day? If you have any questions regarding sanitation or food safety, or require additional information regarding staff training, please feel free to e-mail us.