

# Beware of contaminated meat

For the past two weeks, several butchers around the country have been closed on suspicion of using formalin to preserve meat. Although tests are being carried out to prove this, **Carolyne B. Atangaza** explores the effects of such drugs on your health.

...FROM COVER

Dr George Bwesigye, a general practitioner at Najeera Hospital, says formalin is a colourless, strong-smelling chemical substance usually used in industries such as textiles, plastics, papers, paint and construction. It is also well-known in the preservation of corpses. It is derived from formaldehyde gas dissolved in water.

Dr Bwesigye says the chemical is so dangerous that consumption of two tea spoonfuls can cause death. "Formalin is very toxic and can cause death if eaten or inhaled because it burns the airway," he adds.

## How to detect

Asked how one can detect its presence in food items, Dr Bwesigye says the absence of flies is the first indicator. "Also exposure to its gas or vapour can cause irritation to the eyes, nose and respiratory tract, causing sneezing. So bringing the suspicious item close to your eyes should cause your eyes to water or make you sneeze," Dr Bwesigye explains. He, however, cautions against this since multiple exposures can lead to asthma, sore throat, larynx constriction, bronchitis and pneumonia.

## Skin irritation

Formalin can also affect the skin, causing dermatitis or allergic reaction. According to the American Cancer Society, several studies have found that embalmers and medical professionals that use formaldehyde (the substance used to make formalin) have an increased risk of leukemia, particularly myeloid leukemia. Some studies of industrial workers exposed to formaldehyde have also found increased risks of leukemia.

According to sciencepublishing-group.com, an online portal, the European Journal of Clinical and Biomedical Sciences performed a



A butcher cuts meat in Buwama Town recently. If possible, buy meat from a trusted butchery or the abattoirs. FILE PHOTO

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NUMBER OF MINUTES FOODS SUCH AS FISH OR VEGETABLES SHOULD BE SOAKED IN VINEGAR TO RID THEM OF FORMALIN

simple experiment on samples that tested positive in attempt to remove the formalin content. These products were washed thoroughly and boiled in water at a temperature of 80°C for five to 10 minutes. The formalin level was reduced but not fully removed. Thus the conclusion that once formalin is added, it cannot be removed.

However, Dr Bwesigye recommends increasing the consumption of healthy food which will help block toxic particles trying to enter the body and improve

## How the public can protect themselves

- Soak fruits in fresh water
- Peel your fruits before consumption
- Another effective way to rid food items of formalin is by using vinegar. First, mix a cup of vinegar into one litre of water. Keep the vegetables, fruits or fish into vinegar mixed water for 15-20 minutes. Then rinse well with ordinary water. This method can be used to remove around 98 per cent formalin from food and food ingredients
- Cook meat at 960C boiling point to vaporize formalin.
- Boil water to 960C boiling point then add your milk to the boiling water in order to vaporize formalin.

Source: European Journal of Clinical and Biomedical Sciences

the body's immunity. "The body's immunity plays a key role in blocking the attack of toxic compounds in formalin. If the body's immunity is low, it is possible that even low concentrations of formalin might be able to have an adverse effect on the individual," he explains.

## Safety

Dr Catherine Nanozi, a nutritionist at Cathy's Wellness Centre, says the obvious way to prevent oneself from being exposed to formalin would be to abstain from consuming the tainted meat. In instances where this is difficult, she recommends cutting down on the frequency and the portion.

"Here the thinking is that the less meat one consumes, the less toxins they are exposed to," she explains. She further recommends pairing your meat with foods that will help remove toxins: "Fruits, especially citrus fruits aid the body by flushing out toxins and jump-starting the digestive tract with

enzymatic processes. They are also high in liquid-content which helps the body wash out toxins," she adds.

## How to identify contaminated food stuff

Here are basic ways to tell that your food could be contaminated. The lack of accurate methods and the ubiquitous presence of formalin in foods make the detection of illegally added formalin challenging.

1. Fish contaminated with formalin is stiff, has rubbery flesh, hard scales, red gills and clear eyes, does not have a 'fishy smell', and has no flies flying around it. Press the fish, if it feels tender it should be free of formalin. Choose fish which still has its fishy smell.
2. Meat which is contaminated with formalin is stiff and colourless. Avoid buying such meat.