



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 4, 2012

U.S. Impacted by China Food Safety Concerns

High levels of the toxin [aflatoxin](#) were found in peanuts in three markets, and in cooking oil in four restaurants, Xinhua reported.

“Aflatoxin is produced by a fungus that commonly grows on crops such as grains and peanuts,” the news site reported.” While the toxin is found in insignificant levels in most peanut crops, including those grown in the United States, high levels of aflatoxin have been linked to liver damage and cancer.



An [earlier report](#) from the government news site said that high levels of the same toxic substance had been found recently in milk and other products from a popular dairy company in the region. “An initial investigation showed that the contamination was caused by mildewed feed given to cows in the dairy’s plant in southwest Sichuan province,” reported Xinhua. The news agency said that the [Mengniu Dairy Company](#) had “issued a public apology in an [online statement](#), but insisted that the problem was discovered before the tainted milk could enter the market.”

China has been dealing with concerns over food safety since a high-profile [crisis in 2008](#), when hundreds of thousands of children became ill, and at least a half dozen died, after drinking powdered milk laced with melamine, a chemical used in making plastics, that had been surreptitiously added to diluted milk in order to bump up protein readings. The scandal led to the execution of at least two individuals involved in the contamination, along with prison sentences for others ranging from 15 years to life.

According to the [BBC](#), melamine contamination surfaced in the country’s dairy industry again in 2010, when inspectors confiscated significant quantities of melamine-laced milk powder from a dairy plant in Qinghai province. “Test samples showed the milk powder carried up to 500 times the maximum allowed level of the chemical,” the BBC reported.

But it appears that problems with safe food in China may go further than milk, peanuts, and cooking oil. Kathleen McLaughlin, an American journalist who has spent a decade living in China and covering many aspects of its society, noted in a recent [GlobalPost.com](#) story that a significant amount of rice grown in China may be contaminated by cadmium. In fact, noted McLaughlin, researchers estimate that as much as 12 million tons of all grains grown annually in China may be contaminated through the heavy-metal polluted soil in which it is grown.



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“The toxic rice reports gained traction in February, when Chinese media highlighted scientific studies showing that up to 10 percent of rice grown in China contained cadmium,” reported McLaughlin. “The toxic heavy metal was presumably deposited onto southern China’s fertile farmlands through years of industrial waste and sewage disposal.”

It is little wonder that China’s food safety problem has raised concerns in the United States. Since 1995, agricultural and seafood imports from China have risen from some \$800 million annually to at least \$4.1 billion, and with it has come a steady cycling of bans for contaminated and unsafe products. For example, in July 2007, [CNN reported](#) on a U.S. ban on several types of Chinese fish and shrimp because of the discovery by inspectors of cancer-causing chemicals and antibiotics in the products.

As of November 2011, a list of foreign products the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is currently refusing into the United States includes [143 from China](#) (down from 257 four years earlier), including oatmeal, fish fillets, squid, salmon, pollock, frog legs, mushrooms, dried citrus, and caramel popcorn, all for dangerous ingredients or filthy and decomposing product. In addition the banned products included nutritional supplements, medical devices, and makeup.

According to an [NPR](#) report, toothpaste was another Chinese import on the FDA’s radar, because of fears that it contained the same “sweetener” — a poisonous ingredient used in the manufacture of anti-freeze — that had killed consumers of Chinese cough syrup sold in Panama.

And [U.S. News and World Report](#) noted that the largest pet food recall in U.S. history was brought on by “exported wheat gluten from China that contained the toxic chemical melamine and was used as an additive in food sold under more than 100 brand names. Hundreds of dogs and cats died; an official tally was never issued.” What complicated the situation was the finding that some three million broiler chickens had been fed the tainted pet food, and later butchered and sold to restaurants and markets across the United States.

The problem, however, is that inspectors test only an infinitesimal percent of the billions of dollars of products rolling into the United States from China, including such food ingredients as apple juice, used as a sweetener in many foods; garlic and garlic powder; sausage casings; and cocoa butter, to name but a few.

Alarming, some products that were once produced commonly in America are now almost exclusively made in China, which has aggressively under-priced products in order to gain a monopoly. One example is vitamins. Reported NPR: “China now supplies 80 percent of the world’s ascorbic acid — vitamin C. It’s used as a preservative and nutritional enriching agent in thousands of foods. One-third of the world’s vitamin A now comes from China, along with much of the supply of vitamin B-12 and many health-food supplements, such as the amino acid lysine.”

But while most consumers can live with the lower prices of such products produced in China, they may not be able to survive the hidden cost of potentially deadly contamination. In 2007, U.S. inspectors discovered lead-contaminated multivitamins on store shelves, and in Europe vitamin A laced with dangerous bacteria nearly made it into a batch of baby food.

Ultimately it is up to companies which use Chinese ingredients or distribute Chinese products to guarantee their safety and purity. But it appears that in some cases, at least, lower prices trump quality — and, perhaps, even safety. Honey may be one of those examples. According to [Food Safety News](#), at least a third of all honey sold in the United States “is likely to have been smuggled in from China and may be tainted with illegal antibiotics and heavy metals.” An investigation by the food industry



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publication found that “millions of pounds of honey banned as unsafe in dozens of countries are being imported and sold here in record quantities.”

Experts queried by *Food Safety News* said there was evidence that some of the nation’s largest honey packers knowingly purchased mislabeled, transshipped (smuggled), and even altered product to sell “cheaper than those companies who demand safety, quality, and rigorously inspected honey.”

One well known honey producer, Richard Adee of the [American Honey Producers Association](#), told *Food Safety News*: “It’s no secret that the honey smuggling is being driven by money, the desire to save a couple of pennies a pound.” He added that some “big packers are still using imported honey of uncertain safety that they know is illegal because they know their chances of getting caught are slim.”

Almost 60 percent of honey imported into the United States each year — around 123 million pounds — came from Asian countries, “traditional laundering points for Chinese honey,” *Food Safety News* reported. It is honey that has been rejected by pickier countries, like those of the European Union. Adee called America the “dumping ground” for inferior, often adulterated honey.

While some domestic companies, as well as government agencies, are pressing countries such as China to tighten up on the safety of its exported products, a flood of such goods, facilitated by global trade agreements, has overwhelmed safety efforts and given manufacturers and export/import businesses nearly unfettered access to a largely unguarded American market.



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