

# This is an Official DPHHS HAN Advisory

Distributed via the DPHHS Health Alert Network (HAN) System

Friday, March 10, 2006 15:30 MT (3:30 PM MST)

## **Potentially Contaminated Foods Delivered to Schools Throughout the State.**

The attached press release concerning potentially contaminated foods delivered to schools throughout the state has been distributed to the media. This HAN message is intended to provide you with additional information to assist health agencies with responding to any questions that may arise. This information is intended as an update to the previous email sent to local sanitarians on 3/6/06 from the DPHHS Food & Consumer Safety Program.

**OPI is making arrangements to track and pick up the recalled items. We are requesting that local nurses and/or sanitarians check with local schools listed on the attached spreadsheet to confirm their receipt of this important information from the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and ensure that products of concern have been taken out of circulation.**

At this time we are not aware of any illness resulting from the products and this recall is being issued as a precaution. As stated in the attached press release, ingestion of ammonia could result in an acute illness characterized by headache, nausea, vomiting, and a burning throat. Symptoms usually occur within an hour of exposure, and there are no known long-term impacts.

The information below outlines some of the steps taken thus far:

- DPHHS responded to the first notification of possible contamination, in early February, by advising that exposed foods be held and not served.
- OPI initiated contact with school programs to place a hold on potentially contaminated items.
- DPHHS initiated communication with FDA immediately. FDA guidance indicated that there was a low probability that ammonia would penetrate packaging.
- DPHHS proceeded to sample products and submit to FDA lab for testing.
- Testing indicated the presence of ammonia inside the packaging of 2 products.
- There is no acceptable level established for ammonia and based on testing results, DPHHS has determined that it is not possible to ensure that any of the products present during the leak are safe for consumption.
- DPHHS has collaborated with the Office of Public Instruction to eliminate any possibility of consumption of the exposed food products.
- OPI issued additional guidance (attached) to track all potential food items involved in this matter

**Again, the Office of Public Instruction has initiated the retrieval of listed food products from schools and distribution centers. DPHHS requests that local health departments verify that schools within their jurisdictions have appropriately separated and secured the listed food products. Please contact DPHHS at 444-2408 for additional information.**

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The goal Montana's Health Alert Network is to transmit information to local public health authorities as quickly as possible, and assign a suitable priority to the message that is sensitive to the impact of a health-related event providing information of immediate utility relative to the public health and safety of Montanans. For questions or comments relative to Montana's HAN system you may contact the Montana State HAN Coordinator Jim Aspevig at <mailto:jaspevig@mt.gov> or the Associate HAN Coordinator Gerry Wheat at <mailto:gwheat@mt.gov>

### **Categories of Health Alert messages:**

- Health Alert:** conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.
- Health Advisory:** provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.
- Health Update:** provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

**Info Service Message:** provides general information regarding a situation or opportunity; does not typically require immediate action.

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This message has been sent under blind carbon copy (bcc) to suppress the display of a large number of e-mail addresses. You have received this message based upon the information contained within our emergency notification data base. If you have a different or additional e-mail or fax address that you would like us to use please notify us as soon as possible by e-mail at hhshan@mt.gov  
<mailto:hhshan@mt.gov>

For immediate release

March 9, 2006

Contact: Gayle Shirley, Public Information Officer, DPHHS, 406-444-2596

Joe Lamson, Communications Director, OPI, 406-444-3160

## **DPHHS Recalls Potentially Contaminated Food**

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) is recalling more than 3,000 cases of food delivered to school lunch programs across the state because the food may have been tainted with ammonia.

“We have received no reports of illness associated with the food,” said Joan Miles, DPHHS director. “But we will not take risks with the health of our children. We are recalling all of the food, and it will be destroyed.”

The department learned in late January of an ammonia leak in a Butte freezer facility that DPHHS leases to store commodity foods from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The leak occurred in a major coolant supply line. Ammonia is commonly used as a coolant in commercial freezers.

All food was immediately removed from the freezer, and the freezer was repaired the same day. Department staff inspected the food, which was frozen and appropriately packaged.

“Our primary concern was to ensure that no one’s health or safety was at risk as a result of eating any food that might have been tainted by the ammonia,” Miles said. “Based on information from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), we had no reason to believe the ammonia would permeate the packaging, so we determined that the food was still suitable for human consumption.”

The department later shipped 3,443 cases of the frozen food to 156 school districts across the state. DPHHS is the primary provider of storage for food used in the school lunch program.

In early February, a school complained to the department that food cases it had received smelled of ammonia. The department notified schools through the state Office of Public Instruction to set the food aside and avoid serving it until further notice. The department then sent samples of the food to an FDA lab for testing.

On Feb. 27, the Department received the results of those tests, which revealed that the tested food samples had been tainted by the ammonia.

“We hope we’ve acted in time to avoid anyone becoming sick as a result of this incident,” Miles said. “We advise anyone who believes that they or their child may have been exposed to tainted food to contact their local health department to report the exposure.”

Ammonia is a colorless gas that can liquefy under pressure or dissolve in water. It is found naturally in the environment but can be toxic at high levels. It has a very sharp odor and is likely to be detected by smell or taste well before it reaches a concentration that may be harmful.

Ammonia is a corrosive substance, and the main toxic effects are burning of the skin, eyes, or other sites that have come into direct contact with it. If a person swallows ammonia in food or water, it circulates through the bloodstream in seconds, according to the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. Most of the ammonia rapidly changes into other harmless substances. The rest leaves the body through the urine within a couple of days.

Symptoms of ammonia toxicity include headache, nausea, vomiting, and a burning throat. Such symptoms usually occur within an hour of exposure, and there are no known long-term impacts, Miles said.

“We’re very disturbed by this incident and are exploring what we can do to ensure that this won’t happen again,” Miles said.

She noted that DPHHS is investigating other storage options and reviewing its protocols regarding handling of potentially contaminated food.

The department will begin retrieving all of the cases of food from schools beginning March 13. In the meantime, the department has reminded schools not to serve the food.

**SCHOOLS, FOODS, AND QUANTITIES  
RECEIVED OF AMMONIA EXPOSED FROZEN FOODS**

Agrmnt #	County	Sponname	Cherries	Chix Fajita Strips	Peach Cups	Pork Roast	Potato Wedges	Turkey Roast	Cheese Mozz Shred	Carrots	Chix Diced	Eggs Frz	Roasted Chicken	Chix Bread		
01-0005	Beaverhead	Dillon Elementary	0	14	0	6	5	7	10							42
01-0009	Beaverhead	Lima K-12 Schools	2	4	1	4	0	1	1	1	1	2	2			19
03-0028	Blaine	Chinook Public Schools	6	0	6	7	3	4			6					32
03-0030	Blaine	Harlem Public Schools	0	16	6	10	0	0								32
03-0034	Blaine	Zurich Elementary	0	1	0	0	1	0								2
03-0044	Blaine	Turner Public Schools	1	0	0	0	0	0								1
03-1213	Blaine	Hays-Lodge Pole K-12 Schls	0	5	1	0	0	0								6
03-9176	Blaine	St Paul Mission School	0	1	0	1	0	0								2
06-0087	Carter	Ekalaka Public Schools	0	5	3	2	2	3								15
07-0098	Cascade	Great Falls Public Schools	0	104	100	0	97	122					48			471
07-0101	Cascade	Cascade Public Schools	3	6	5	0	5	6								25
07-0104	Cascade	Centerville Public Schools	0	6	8	9	0	0								23
07-0112	Cascade	Belt Public Schools	0	6	4	1	4	0					8			23
07-0127	Cascade	Vaughn Elementary	0	0	5	0	0	5								10
07-0131	Cascade	Ulm Elementary	0	4	0	2	1	2								9
07-9180	Cascade	Our Lady Of Lourds Catholic School	0	0	1	2	3	0								6
07-9256	Cascade	Holy Spirit Catholic School	0	2	3	2	1	0								8
07-9258	Cascade	School for Deaf & Blind	0	2	0	1	0	0					2	2		7
07-9658	Cascade	Kairos Youth Services Inc.	0	0	0	2	0	1		1			1			5
07-9679	Cascade	G F Childrens Receiving Home	0	0	0	0	0	0								0
07-9936	Cascade	Cascade Co Regional Yth Services	0	1	0	2	0	0								3
07-9979	Cascade	Great Falls Central Catholic High School	0	2	0	0	0	0								2
08-0145	Cascade	Highwood Public Schools	1	1	1	3	1	2	2		1	2		2		16
08-0153	Chouteau	Geraldine Public Schools	0	2	0	2	2	1								7
09-0172	Custer	Miles City Public Schools	0	12	7	14	6	16	16	4		6		16		97
09-0173	Custer	Kircher Elementary	1	2	3	1	1	0	1		1					10
09-0187	Custer	Kinsey Elementary	1	1	0	1	1	0	1				1			6
09-9187	Missoula	Sacred Heart School	0	3	1	4	0	0								8
10-0194	Daniels	Scobey K-12 Schools	0	2	1	3	3	0			1					10
10-0196	Daniels	Peerless K-12 Schools	0	1	0	1	1	0								3
10-0200	Daniels	Flaxville K-12 Schools	0	0	0	3	0	0								3
11-0206	Dawson	Glendive Public Schools	5	10	14	12	12	15	5							73
11-0228	Dawson	Richey Public Schools	2	3	0	2	2	0								9
11-9766	Dawson	DEAP Skyreach Group Home	0	0	0	0	0	0								0
12-0236	Deer Lodge	Anaconda Public Schools	0	12	6	8	9	5								40
12-6581	Deer Lodge	RYO Correctional Facility	0	0	0	0	0	0								0
12-9665	Deer Lodge	Discovery House	0	0	0	0	0	0								0
13-0244	Fallon	Baker K-12 Schools	0	0	0	6	6	2								14
13-0256	Fallon	Plevna K-12 Schools	0	1	1	1	0	0								3
14-0258	Fergus	Lewistown Public Schools	16	8	0	12	12	12				6		6		72
14-0264	Fergus	Deerfield Elementary	0	0	0	1	1	0								2
14-0268	Fergus	Grass Range Public Schools	0	2	2	3	1	0								8
14-0272	Fergus	King Colony Elementary	0	0	2	1	0	1				1				5
14-0273	Fergus	Moore Public Schools	1	0	2	4	0	2								9
14-0280	Fergus	Roy K-12 Schools	1	1	1	0	1	0								4
14-0281	Fergus	Denton Public Schools	0	2	2	2	1	1								8
14-0291	Fergus	Winifred K-12 Schools	3	3	2	3	1	1								13
14-1218	Fergus	Ayers Elementary	0	0	0	0	0	0	1							1
15-0309	Flathead	Swan River Elementary	0	4	0	0	0	0			3					7

2 RSTD CHIX RTND

**SCHOOLS, FOODS, AND QUANTITIES  
RECEIVED OF AMMONIA EXPOSED FROZEN FOODS**

Agrmnt #	County	Sponname	Cherries	Chix Fajita Strips	Peach Cups	Pork Roast	Potato Wedges	Turkey Roast	Cheese Mozz Shred	Carrots	Chix Diced	Eggs Frz	Roasted Chicken	Chix Bread	
15-0311	Flathead	Kalispell Public Schools	15	10	45	10	35	74							189
15-0313	Flathead	Columbia Falls Public Schools	5	24	50	27	25	5							136
15-0323	Flathead	Kila Elementary	0	9	0	7	0	2				4	8	2	32
15-0327	Flathead	Somers Elementary	0	2	4	0	5	0							11
15-0331	Flathead	Bigfork Public Schools	0	24	3	0	5	0							32
15-0335	Flathead	Whitefish Public Schools	15	5	10	0	0	3		6					39
15-0339	Flathead	Evergreen Elementary	15	12	4	0	10	2							43
15-0341	Flathead	Marion Elementary	0	1	1	0	2	0							4
15-1184	Flathead	West Valley Elementary	0	0	0	0	0	0							0
15-9196	Flathead	St Matthews School	0	4	0	0	3	0							7
16-0348	Gallatin	Manhattan Public Schools	0	18	5	4	0	7							34
16-0351	Gallatin	Bozeman Public Schools	8	0	48	0	20	0							76
16-0354	Gallatin	Willow Creek Public Schools	0	1	0	1	0	0							2
16-0360	Gallatin	Three Forks Public Schools	0	6	5	0	5	1							17
16-0363	Gallatin	Monforton Elementary	0	0	2	5	2	0							9
16-0364	Gallatin	Gallatin Gateway Elementary	0	1	2	2	2	3	7						17
16-0368	Gallatin	Belgrade Public Schools	4	20	13	0	25	0							62
16-0374	Gallatin	West Yellowstone K-12	0	5	0	0	5	2							12
16-9199	Gallatin	Manhattan Christian Schl	6	4	0	1	6	6				4			27
17-0377	Garfield	Jordan Public Schools	2	4	0	2	3	0	1				1		13
20-0416	Granite	Philipsburg K-12 Schools	0	4	4	2	2	0							12
20-0419	Granite	Drummond Public Schools	0	4	3	0	0	1							8
22-0452	Jefferson	Clancy Elementary	5	8	0	0	0	5		2	2				22
22-0453	Jefferson	Whitehall Public Schools	0	9	1	4	7	0	6						27
22-0457	Jefferson	Jefferson High School	0	0	0	0	0	2							2
22-0460	Jefferson	Montana City Elementary	0	2	3	2	5	0							12
23-0464	Judith Basin	Stanford K-12 Schools	3	1	4	0	3	0							11
23-0469	Judith Basin	Hobson K-12 Schools	0	3	1	0	0	2							6
23-0472	Judith Basin	Geyser Public Schools	0	1	1	3	1	0							6
24-0474	Lake	Arlee Public Schools	0	4	2	4	1	2							13
24-0478	Lake	Polson Public Schools	6	16	16	4	15	6							63
24-0481	Lake	St Ignatius K-12 Schools	4	4	2	8	4	0			4				26
24-1200	Lake	Ronan Public Schools	0	4	10	12	18	4							48
24-1205	Lake	Charlo Public Schools	0	0	0	0	0	1							1
24-9396	Lake	Two Eagle River H S	0	2	0	0	2	0							4
25-0487	Lewis & Clark	Helena Public Schools	20	20	45	45	40	30							200
25-0492	Lewis & Clark	East Helena Elementary	0	0	0	0	18	2							20
25-0495	Lewis & Clark	Wolf Creek Elementary	0	0	0	1	0	0							1
25-1221	Lewis & Clark	Lincoln K-12 Schools	0	2	0	3	2	0							7
25-9034	Custer	Montana Dept of Corrections (Pine Hills	4	2	2	0	1	1							10
25-9667	Lewis & Clark	Florence Crittenton Home	0	0	0	0	0	0							0
25-9668	Lewis & Clark	Intermountain Childrens Home	0	4	5	0	0	0							9
25-9751	Lewis & Clark	Shodair Hospital	0	2	3	3	0	0							8
27-0519	Lincoln	Troy Public Schools	0	5	0	5	2	1							13
27-0522	Lincoln	Libby K-12 Schools	0	5	2	10	30	0							47
27-0527	Lincoln	Eureka Public Schools	0	4	0	6	5	3							18
27-0529	Lincoln	Fortine Elementary	0	2	1	1	0	0							4
27-0534	Lincoln	Trego Elementary	0	1	0	1	1	0							3
28-0536	Madison	Alder-Upper Ruby Elem	0	0	0	0	0	0							0

**SCHOOLS, FOODS, AND QUANTITIES  
RECEIVED OF AMMONIA EXPOSED FROZEN FOODS**

Agrmnt #	County	Sponname	Cherries	Chix Fajita Strips	Peach Cups	Pork Roast	Potato Wedges	Turkey Roast	Cheese Mozz Shred	Carrots	Chix Diced	Eggs Frz	Roasted Chicken	Chix Bread	
28-0537	Madison	Sheridan Public Schools	0	6	6	2	2	1							17
28-0540	Madison	Twin Bridges K-12 Schools	0	4	3	0	4	1							12
28-0543	Madison	Harrison K-12 Schools	2	1	1	2	1	1							8
28-0546	Madison	Ennis K-12 Schools	0	10	8	0	0	0							18
29-0548	McCone	Circle Public Schools	0	2	0	4	1	3							10
31-0577	Mineral	Alberton K-12 Schools	2	4	2	6	4	1							19
31-0579	Mineral	Superior K-12 Schools	0	0	3	3	0	0							6
31-0582	Mineral	St Regis K-12 Schools	0	2	4	2	6	0							14
32-0586	Missoula	Hellgate Elementary	4	10	9	15	15	10							63
32-0589	Missoula	Potomac Elementary	0	1	0	4	1	0							6
32-0590	Missoula	Bonner Elementary	0	0	2	3	4	3					3		15
32-0595	Missoula	Clinton Elementary	0	3	0	4	0	0							7
32-0597	Missoula	Seeley Lake Elementary	0	4	6	0	0	3							13
32-0599	Missoula	Frenchtown K-12 Schools	0	30	8	0	13	0							51
35-0642	Petroleum	Winnett K-12 Schools	0	4	0	0	1	1							6
36-0647	Phillips	Dodson Public Schools	0	1	1	2	2	1							7
36-0653	Phillips	Landusky School Dist 7	0	0	0	1	0	1							2
36-0657	Phillips	Saco Public Schools	0	3	0	0	2	0							5
36-0659	Phillips	Malta K-12 Schools	6	7	8	12	13	12				10			68
36-0663	Phillips	Whitewater K-12 Schools	0	2	1	1	2	0							6
39-0712	Powell	Deer Lodge Elementary	15	5	5	12	8	0							45
39-0719	Powell	Elliston Elementary	0	2	0	4	1	1							8
40-0726	Prairie	Terry K-12 Schools	3	3	0	2	0	3	2	1	1	2	4	2	23
42-0746	Richland	Sidney Public Schools	0	10	11	15	20	7							63
42-0747	Richland	Savage Public Schools	0	4	2	0	2	0							8
42-0750	Richland	Fairview Public Schools	0	0	0	0	0	0							0
42-0754	Richland	Rau Elementary School	0	0	1	0	0	0							1
42-0768	Richland	Lambert Public Schools	0	0	0	2	1	0							3
43-0774	Roosevelt	Frontier Elementary	0	1	4	3	4	1							13
43-0776	Roosevelt	Poplar Public Schools	0	8	7	11	21	7							54
43-0778	Roosevelt	Culbertson Public Schools	0	4	1	2	1	1							9
43-0781	Roosevelt	Wolf Point Public Schls	0	6	8	4	0	0							18
43-0783	Roosevelt	Brockton Public Schools	0	4	2	2	4	0							12
43-0785	Roosevelt	Bainville K-12 Schools	0	2	2	0	1	0							5
43-0787	Roosevelt	Froid Public Schools	1	1	1	3	1	2	2			2			13
45-0802	Sanders	Plains Public Schools	0	4	0	0	10	0							14
45-0804	Sanders	Thompson Falls Public Schls	0	7	0	8	11	4							30
45-0807	Sanders	Trout Creek Elementary	0	2	1	0	1	0							4
45-0808	Sanders	Paradise Elementary	2	1	0	0	0	0							3
45-0809	Sanders	Dixon Elementary School	0	4	1	1	1	0							7
45-0811	Sanders	Noxon Public Schools	0	7	0	2	0	2							11
45-0813	Sanders	Camas Prairie Elem	0	0	0	0	1	0							1
45-0815	Sanders	Hot Springs Public Schools	2	0	3	0	3	0							8
46-0819	Sheridan	Westby K-12 Schools	2	1	1	2	1	0							7
46-0822	Sheridan	Medicine Lake K-12 Schls	0	0	0	2	2	0							4
46-0828	Sheridan	Plentywood K-12 Schools	0	4	4	2	0	0		6		6			22
47-0840	Silver Bow	Butte Public Schools	0	50	0	25	12	0							87
47-0842	Silver Bow	Ramsay Elementary	0	3	1	1	2	0							7
52-0923	Treasure	Hysham K-12 Schools	0	6	0	0	0	1							7





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OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

PO BOX 202501  
HELENA MT 59620-2501  
[www.opi.mt.gov](http://www.opi.mt.gov)  
(406) 444-3095  
(888) 231-9393  
(406) 444-0169 (TTY)

Linda McCulloch  
Superintendent

DATE: March 7, 2006  
TO: SNP Supervisors/Director  
FROM: Judy Wilson  
Food Distribution Coordinator  
RE: Retrieval of Frozen Commodities

The Department of Public Health and Human Services will retrieve frozen commodities that were delivered to your school in January-February 2006.

These items have been on hold while an investigation of a refrigerant leak in the Commodity Program Warehouse was taking place. Because of results of the investigation, the foods will be returned to the warehouse facility.

To retrieve these items in the most efficient way, the enclosed form must be filled out and returned to School Nutrition Programs as soon as possible. Watkins and Shepard Trucking Co. will contact you about picking up these foods from your school.

Please note that **only the items on the list** are to be retrieved. All other commodities that were received on the January-February shipment can be used.

We apologize for the inconvenience and disruption this has caused your food service program. If you have questions, please contact Food Distribution at (406) 444-4415.

C: School Superintendent

Attachment



**OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

PO BOX 202501  
HELENA MT 59620-2501  
www.opi.mt.gov  
(406) 444-3095  
(888) 231-9393  
(406) 444-0169 (TTY)

**Linda McCulloch**  
Superintendent

**Retrieval of Frozen Commodity Foods Received January-February 2006**

Fill in the number of cases of frozen commodity foods that will be picked up by the State Commodity Program. Also document any cases that have been previously discarded and/or consumed. Sign the form and return to OPI immediately.

Product Name	Quantity (Cs) to be Retrieved by State	Quantity (Cs) Discarded On-Site	Quantity (Cs) Consumed On-Site
Cherries			
Breaded Chicken			
Oven Roasted Chicken Pieces			
6/5 Eggs			
Carrots			
Shredded Mozzarella			
Potato Wedges			
Peaches DCD FZ			
Turkey Roast			
Chix Fajita Strips			
Pork Leg Roasts FRZ			

(Signature) \_\_\_\_\_

(School/Facility) \_\_\_\_\_

Return this form to  
OPI School Nutrition Programs  
PO Box 202501  
Helena MT 59620  
or  
Fax (406) 444-2955

*"It is the mission of the Office of Public Instruction to improve teaching and learning through communication, collaboration, advocacy, and accountability to those we serve."*

**Office of Public Instruction  
Official EMAIL To Schools  
March 9, 2006**

In early February the food service people at 156 school districts were notified to hold food commodities that were suspected of being contaminated by ammonia from a refrigeration leak at a Butte warehouse. The commodity samples were tested and found to be contaminated. Subsequently the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) has ordered the commodities to be recalled. OPI has contacted school food people in each affected district with instructions on how the recall is to proceed.

Below is the DPHHS news release on the on recall issued today. To double check whether your district is involved in the recall go to <http://www.opi.mt.gov/PDF/SchoolFood/PR030906FoodRecall.xls> If you have questions please contact Judy Wilson at 444-4415 or [jwilson@mt.gov](mailto:jwilson@mt.gov)

Thank you for your cooperation.

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For immediate release

March 9, 2006

Contact: Gayle Shirley, Public Information Officer, DPHHS, 406-444-2596

Joe Lamson, Communications Director, OPI, 406-444-3160

## **DPHHS Recalls Potentially Contaminated Food**

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“We have received no reports of illness associated with the food,” said Joan Miles, DPHHS director. “But we will not take risks with the health of our children. We are recalling all of the food, and it will be destroyed.”

The department learned in late January of an ammonia leak in a Butte freezer facility that DPHHS leases to store commodity foods from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The leak occurred in a major coolant supply line. Ammonia is commonly used as a coolant in commercial freezers.

All food was immediately removed from the freezer, and the freezer was repaired the same day. Department staff inspected the food, which was frozen and appropriately packaged.

“Our primary concern was to ensure that no one’s health or safety was at risk as a result of eating any food that might have been tainted by the ammonia,” Miles said. “Based on information from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), we had no reason to believe the ammonia would

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On Feb. 27, the Department received the results of those tests, which revealed that the tested food samples had been tainted by the ammonia.

“We hope we’ve acted in time to avoid anyone becoming sick as a result of this incident,” Miles said. “We advise anyone who believes that they or their child may have been exposed to tainted food to contact their local health department to report the exposure.”

Ammonia is a colorless gas that can liquefy under pressure or dissolve in water. It is found naturally in the environment but can be toxic at high levels. It has a very sharp odor and is likely to be detected by smell or taste well before it reaches a concentration that may be harmful.

Ammonia is a corrosive substance, and the main toxic effects are burning of the skin, eyes, or other sites that have come into direct contact with it. If a person swallows ammonia in food or water, it circulates through the bloodstream in seconds, according to the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. Most of the ammonia rapidly changes into other harmless substances. The rest leaves the body through the urine within a couple of days.

Symptoms of ammonia toxicity include headache, nausea, vomiting, and a burning throat. Such symptoms usually occur within an hour of exposure, and there are no known long-term impacts, Miles said.

“We’re very disturbed by this incident and are exploring what we can do to ensure that this won’t happen again,” Miles said.

She noted that DPHHS is investigating other storage options and reviewing its protocols regarding handling of potentially contaminated food.

The department will begin retrieving all of the cases of food from schools beginning March 13. In the meantime, the department has reminded schools not to serve the food.