

False Stories about HIV Infections in Food

A food scare, regarding alleged HIV infections in Thai canned foods, has re-emerged after being thoroughly refuted once before back in 2013. The original scare first surfaced in Malaysia, was quickly disputed and died down but now it has re-emerged on Weibo from where it made its way to the English speaking web via a Filipino Facebook page.

These false stories about HIV infections in food keep popping up again and again; for example a woman in Nebraska claimed that her banana was contaminated with HIV filled blood (it was suffering from blight), in another scare a pineapple was apparently bled over by an HIV infected food seller in Malaysia, allegedly causing a 10 year old boy to become infected (there was no evidence that the boy existed), also from Malaysia (where these false rumours mostly seem to originate) an onion seller contaminated his stock with his HIV infected blood; and then there was a panic in Algeria, apparently, over Libyan oranges (which are actually Tarocco ‘blood’ oranges – oranges with natural deep streaks of red in them) contaminated with HIV infected blood, at least according to the publication, Yemen Now, where it originally appeared. None of these cases could be verified and were all replete with the tell-tale hoax alerts of misplaced capitals, an overuse of exclamation marks, poor grammar and being posted anonymously.

In order to put these needless scares to bed for the last time, look what experts have said on the matter: “Health authorities around the world all agree that transmission of HIV/AIDS via food and beverages is not a known risk.” So said the food industry science body, the Institute of Food Science and Technology, who should know. AIDS expert, Charlotte Walker, was more specific, “You cannot get HIV by eating food with blood on it. HIV in the blood does not survive long outside the body. The time the blood would spend in contact with the mucous membranes in the mouth is minimal, if at all, when consumed with food.”

In Thailand Dr. Jessada Chokdamrongsuk, the Director General of the Department of Disease Control, spearheaded an investigation by the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the Food and Drug Administration of the Ministry of Public health, which found that the Thai food industry, being a crucial component of the Thai economy, maintained the very highest standards, such that no contamination of any kind is allowed to occur and that manufacturers are certified to, and follow the practices of, International food safety standards such as GMP and HACCP and are regularly inspected to ensure compliance.

Experts confirm that even if someone was intent on contaminating food with HIV you cannot get the virus from eating it as it is a very weak virus and cannot survive long outside the body and certainly not through the heat treating canning process. In fact the only way that scientists concede is possible for the transmission of HIV via food was if a person with a combination of HIV, a high viral load and mouth lesions chewed food for a long time, then immediately spat it into the mouth of someone else with mouth lesions,

who again chewed it for a while before swallowing it then, yes, it is faintly possible (<3% chance) the virus could be transmitted. Otherwise it is impossible.

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