

Some comprehensive tests for microorganisms and some additives can only be carried out in a laboratory, and the results ar days. Photo: Dickson Lee

Hong Kong needs to develop quicker food tests to protect public health, Polytechnic University professor says

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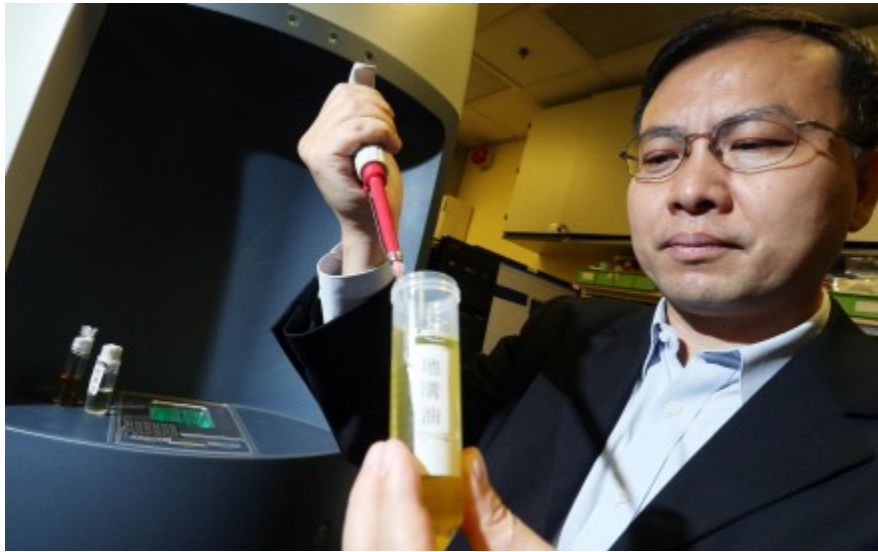




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Hong Kong urgently needs more advanced tools to provide speedy and comprehensive safety tests of imported food amid recent health scares, say local experts ahead of a forum in the city at which 300 international professionals will seek a solution.

The two-day forum held by Polytechnic University in February will be attended by representatives from the World Health Organisation, advisers from the China National Centre for Food Safety Risk Assessment, local government officials and academics.

"As more and more food scare incidents haunt the city, we are in need of more advanced testing tools which can detect harmful substances in food immediately," said Professor Terence Lau Lok-ting of the university's department of applied biology and chemical technology.

A year ago, Hong Kong was hit by the Taiwan "gutter oil" incident in which a manufacturer passed off tonnes of lard for animal feed as edible oil for human consumption. It exposed serious inadequacies in monitoring food safety and prompted the government to review its surveillance system of oil intended for human consumption.



Gutter oil was allegedly supplied to Taiwan from this yard in Yuen Long. The scandal prompted action on the food safety front. Photo: David Wong

With other food, the government conducts quick tests on imported samples collected at different points of the chain, from the border, to the storehouse to the shops.

But a comprehensive test for microorganisms and some additives can only be carried out in a laboratory, and the results are not known for days. By that time, perishable goods such as fruits and vegetables might already have entered the market.

"We need more speedy tools to provide a comprehensive test result on food safety instantly," Lau said. "The technology can only be achieved with research and development of technology."

A few months ago a professor at the university announced the development of a new method to screen out "gutter oils" from edible oils in five minutes by detecting harmful substances.

Lau, convenor of the university's Food Safety Consortium, which is organising the forum, said he hoped the global experts would further such progress by exchanging ideas.

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