

# Japanese Document Radioactivity In Food

by Richard Knox



Eugene Hoshiko/AP

Chiyoko Kaizuka, 83-year-old farmer, weeds a spinach field March 20, in Moriya, Ibaraki prefecture.

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For now at least, fears about an unstoppable disaster at the Fukushima Dai-ichi power plant have calmed a bit. But the crisis has clearly entered a second phase — tainted food and water.

Over the weekend, radioactive iodine and cesium emitted by the crippled facility turned up in milk, spinach and other greens, canola seeds, fava beans and drinking water.

That poses a new problem: How to inform the public about the multiplying and scary-sounding test results without unduly scaring them.

Japan's minister of consumer affairs and food safety pleaded Sunday for public calm.

"I hope the public will not be confused by groundless rumors, but act according to information from reliable sources," said Minister Renho, Japan's most visible female politician, who uses only one name.

But when it comes to radioactivity in food and water, it's hard not to be confused and nervous. The metric that government sources use to measure radioactive iodine and cesium in foodstuffs is becquerels — hardly a familiar yardstick.

For instance, a couple of pounds of spinach grown in the open air near the city of Hitachi, about 60 miles south of the Fukushima power plant, was found to contain 54,000 becquerels of iodine-131. The allowable government limit is 2,000 — or 27 times lower.

The cesium-137 level in Hitachi spinach was about 2,000 becquerels, four times the safety threshold.

Milk from the region has also tested positive for radioactive iodine, though the levels are unclear. Milk from 37 farms in Fukushima prefecture is being withheld from the market.

The government's chief spokesman, Yukio Edano, says the government will decide on Monday whether to impose restrictions on marketing of spinach and milk. At present, prefectural governments decide whether to ask for voluntary withholding of tainted food.

Water supplies all the way to Tokyo have shown traces of radioactivity, but so far the levels have been far below allowable limits.



Enlarge Eugene Hoshiko/AP

Chiyoko Kaizuka, 83-year old farmer, weeds a spinach field in Moriya.

Although the presence of radioactive food and water is unsettling, the widespread testing and prompt disclosure of these results should be reassuring. It's exactly what was lacking in the wake of the 1986 nuclear plant meltdown in Chernobyl in what was then the Soviet Union.

Experts and post-mortem review of the Chernobyl disaster conclude that almost all its public health effects were due to the ingestion of contaminated milk and leafy vegetables for weeks after the facility spewed radioactive particles into the atmosphere. Shifting winds blew the fallout through virtually all points of the compass.

The main result, largely attributed to tainted milk, has been an epidemic of more than 6,000 thyroid cancers, nearly all among people who were children or adolescents at the time of the Chernobyl catastrophe. Of these, 15 had proved fatal by 2005.

However, a report published last week indicates Chernobyl thyroid cancers are still occurring, a quarter century later.

Contrary to many people's impressions, it's not so clear if Chernobyl has caused other solid tumors, though there is some evidence of an increase in leukemia.

Many experts say whatever happens from here on out, the Fukushima accident will not lead to anything like this public health impact. People exposed to radiation from the plant are being given protective potassium iodide pills, though the government has apologized for not handing them out several days earlier.

But more importantly, the radioactivity levels in food and milk are not likely to rise to Chernobyl levels, and contaminated food is being withheld from market (or informed consumers are avoiding it).

Be that as it may, there's something about any level of radioactivity in food that no amount of official reassurance may entirely overcome.

*The report includes material from The Associated Press*