**Health in the grey**

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Food safety pertains to the practices and protocols employed to prevent contamination and ensure food is stored, prepared, and consumed without posing a health risk.

Packaged foods have revolutionized the way we consume edibles, offering convenience, longer shelf life, and often a higher assurance of safety due to standardized processing and handling. Unlike fresh foods that can easily be exposed to pathogens, packaged foods undergo rigorous quality control measures and are sealed to prevent external contamination.

The packaging also provides a protective barrier against environmental factors like air, moisture, and light, which can degrade food quality. Moreover, labels on packaged foods offer consumers transparency about ingredients, nutritional value, and expiration dates, allowing for informed consumption choices. These distinguishing features enhance food safety and cater to the modern-day consumer’s need for convenience and reliability.

However, the concept of the grey market has polluted food safety. The grey market states the trade of imported goods through distribution channels that are legal but unintended, or unapproved by the original manufacturer or brand. Unlike black market products, which are illegal or counterfeit, grey market goods are legitimate products. However, they might not have been meant for sale in the region where they’re being sold or might bypass certain official distribution networks.

The grey market’s entry into the food sector has raised considerable safety and compliance issues. While electronics or luxury goods primarily pose authenticity concerns, food items carry additional health implications. When food products are crafted for a specific market, they are formulated to meet the dietary, cultural, and regulatory requirements of that region.

However, with grey market channels, products intended for one region can find their way into another. For example, certain ingredients permissible in the country of origin might be banned or restricted in others due to health concerns, cultural dietary restrictions, or varying food safety standards. Consequently, consumers in the importing country may unknowingly consume products that local regulations deem unsafe or inappropriate, posing potential health risks.

Another critical facet of the grey market food trade is the uncertainty surrounding product freshness. Unlike non-perishable items, many food products have a limited shelf life. Products traded through the grey market often take a tortuous route to their final destination, with multiple stopovers and reroutes.

These lengthy, unsanctioned distribution routes can compromise the freshness of the product, potentially diminishing its nutritional value or, worse, rendering it unsafe for consumption. There’s an added risk that these products might be nearing or even past their expiry dates upon reaching consumers, posing severe health hazards, especially if the goods are perishable by nature.

Lastly, the grey market introduces branding and authenticity challenges for food items. A product’s packaging, branding, or labeling, designed for one demographic or region, may not resonate with or may even mislead consumers in another region. Variations in packaging design, language, nutritional information, or product claims can create confusion.

Even if the product within is genuine and of high quality, discrepancies in its outer presentation can raise red flags for consumers. This leads them to question the product’s authenticity or even its safety. Such branding inconsistencies not only impact consumer trust but can also have long-term implications for a brand’s reputation, especially if consumers mistakenly deem genuine products as counterfeits.

Pakistan’s flourishing consumer food market has witnessed a concerning surge in grey trade. This phenomenon, although not unique to Pakistan, has raised significant food safety concerns, especially with questionable adherence to food import regulations like the SRO 237, as issued by the Ministry of Commerce.

The products that bypass the stringent requirements of local food regulations, such as those specified in SRO 237 manifest many implications. Consumers often face labeling discrepancies, where vital information is either misrepresented or entirely omitted. In many cases, labels might feature ingredients in foreign languages, leaving consumers in the dark about what they’re consuming in terms of its expiry dates. Even more concerning is the presence of unauthenticated nutrition information, raising questions about the accuracy and reliability of product claims.

The proliferation of the grey market, especially in the food sector, can jeopardize public health and safety. In countries like Pakistan, where this unofficial trade is prevalent, there’s more at stake than just economic losses to the government or brand image erosion. Tampering practices, such as repackaging expired items or diluting authentic products, introduce health risks that strain healthcare systems.

To combat this, the government should prioritize robust regulations, enhanced enforcement, and public awareness campaigns. This also requires collaboration among regulators like customs authorities and law-enforcement forces on borders and ports, and national and provincial food authorities to keep check on market shelves. The joint effort can direct regulations and market transparency and can facilitate the combatting of illicit food trade. Moreover, continuous engagement with genuine producers to establish product authentication systems and empower consumers with rights and knowledge can be instrumental in curbing the challenges of the grey market.

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