ROME, 4 July 2012–The UN food standards body has agreed on new regulations -- including the maximum level of melamine in liquid milk formula for babies -- to protect the health of consumers across the world. Other measures adopted include new food safety standards on seafood, melons, dried figs and food labelling.

The **Codex Alimentarius** Commission, jointly run by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), sets **international** **food** **safety** and **quality** **standards** to promote **safer** and more **nutritious** **food** for **consumers** **worldwide**. Codex standards serve in many cases as a basis for national legislation, and provide the food safety benchmarks for **international** **food** **trade**.

Melamine

Melamine can be lethal at high concentrations and has been used illegally to increase apparent protein content in food products including infant formula and milk powder. Milk tainted with melamine has caused death and illness in infants. Two years ago, the Codex Commission adopted a maximum melamine level of 1 mg/kg for *powdered* infant formula and of 2.5 mg/kg for other foods and animal feed. The Commission has now set a maximum limit of 0.15 mg/kg for melamine in *liquid* infant milk.

Melamine is used to make dishware and kitchenware, among other industrial applications. The new limit will help governments protect consumers by determining if detected levels of melamine result from unavoidable melamine contamination that does not cause health problems or from deliberate adulteration.

Dried figs and aflatoxins

Aflatoxins, a group of mycotoxins produced by molds, are toxic and are known to be carcinogenic. They can be found in a variety of products such as dried fruits, nuts, spices and cereals at high levels if the produce is not stored properly. The Commission now agreed a safe maximum limit of 10 micrograms/kg for dried figs, together with details on how test sampling should be conducted.

Melons

An emerging public health issue relates to the increased popularity of pre-cut melon slices. Exposed pulp of the fruit can become a breeding ground for bacteria. This has been linked to life-threatening *salmonella* and *listeria* outbreaks.

The Commission recommended that pre-cut melons should be wrapped or packaged and refrigerated as soon as possible and distributed at temperatures of 4^0 C or less. Cooling and cold-storing was recommended as soon as possible after harvest, while knife blades used for cutting or peeling should be disinfected on a regular basis.

Seafood and viruses

Food hygiene in seafood, particularly for molluscs, such as mussels and oysters, have become a major food safety concern. The Commission adopted a set of preventive hygiene measures aimed to control food-borne viruses. Viruses are generally more resistant than bacteria and those transmitted by the faecal-oral route can persist for months in bivalve molluscs, soil, water and sediments. They can survive freezing, refrigeration, UV radiation and disinfection but are sensitive to heat.

Common food-borne viral diseases are caused by *hepatitis A virus* and *norovirus*. The Commission noted that the main hazard for the production of molluscs, such as oysters and mussels, was the biological contamination of the waters in which they grow.

It is therefore important to ensure the seawater quality of growing areas, the Commission noted. When there is a likelihood or evidence of viral contamination, closure of the area, destruction of contaminated molluscs and/or heat treatment before consumption of already harvested molluscs is recommended.

Mandatory nutrition labeling

Codex recommended that food manufacturers across the world label nutritional content on their products to ensure that consumers are better informed; the recommendation is in line with WHO's Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health and is a major step forward in promoting healthy eating worldwide.

The 49-year-old Codex Alimentarius Commission, meeting from 2-7 July, is attended by 600 delegates representing 184 countries plus the European Union.